

BLACK LAGOON

شرعی طان بادی

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Roanapur

STORY

ロックこと岡島緑郎は元・日本の商社マン。

だが今では海賊まがいの運び屋「ラグーン商会」の見習い水夫として、
ダッチ、レヴィ、ベニーとともに改造魚雷艇「ブラック・ラグーン号」に乗りこみ、
アジアの海を駆けめぐっている。

彼らが本拠地を置く無法者たちの街「ロアナプラ」は、
ロシアのパラライカ、香港の張らを筆頭とする、世界中の犯罪組織が群雄割拠しており、
今は辛うじてその均衡が保たれていた。

今回の物語は、ロックがレヴィとともにかつての故郷「日本」を訪れるその少し前の出来事。
かつて砂塵舞う地で志を共にし戦った兵士とその部下、そしてその指揮官の、
極めて個人的な邂逅の記録である――。



Dutch



Rock



Revy



Benny



Chang



Balalaika

Rock (Okajima Rokuro) was just a normal Japanese businessman, but through a series of unlikely events, he found himself part of the "Lagoon Company," a group of transporters who do a little pirating on the side. Together with Dutch, Revy, and Benny, he sails the seas of Asia aboard the modified torpedo boat "Black Lagoon."

Their base, the lawless city of Roanapur, is just barely balanced on the brink of outright war, controlled and occupied by criminal organizations from across the globe. At the head of the pack are Balalaika of Russia and Chang of Hong Kong.

Our story finds Roanapur just a little while before Rock, with Revy in tow, is due to head back to his old home of Japan.

It is a tale about soldiers who once fought united under a cause in a land of sandy winds, the entirely personal reunion of a captain and her one-time subordinate...

Dramatis Personae

Rock

Full name, Okajima Rokuro. Originally a businessman working for a trade company, but after being kidnapped by the Lagoon Company, changed jobs and became a transporter in name only. Actually more like a pirate.

Revy

The Lagoon's gunslinger. Nicknamed "Two Hand." Possesses a hair-trigger temper.

Dutch

The Lagoon Company's boss, always calm and collected.

Benny

The Lagoon's tech wiz.

Balalaika

Female boss of the Russian mafia, Hotel Moscow's Thai branch.

Chang

Boss of the Triad's Thai branch.

Stan

Sniper with a military background. A severe heroin junkie, but with a rifle in his hands he becomes the stuff of legend.

Jake

Also known as U.C.J. Manager of the murder blog Deadly Biz and also a gunman.

Caroline Morgan

Self-proclaimed descendant of the admiral and pirate Henry Morgan. A swordswoman who wields a priceless blade passed down from the 17th century.

The Man in the Black Facemask

One who comes from the shadows; he has no name fit to reveal. Skilled in the wonders of the Orient.

Shenhua

Chinese bodyguard employed by Chang. Nicknamed "Yes Lady."

Leigarch

Driver employed by Chang. A druggie, but his driving skills are top notch.

Tatiana Yakovleva

Auditor currently staying at the Thai branch of Hotel Moscow. Former KGB.

Prologue

Sand the color of bone. The last glimpse of a corpse, dry as paper, worn away by the winds.

Flesh burns beneath the blazing sun and parches into nothingness in the face of sandpaper gales. The bones left behind break apart like dust and pile atop one another... again, and again, until they cover the earth.

All that can be seen is death. A land of corpses. The sky a radioactive cobalt blue.

A bird of death spreads its rotating wings of metal and cries out, bathed in fiery sunlight. Napalm rain falls in a torrent. Sight melts away like a movie played on burning film.

The sound of gunfire comes close, then fades away, like the tide. And as the waves take away seaweed, so do the guns take away the living, breaking them apart and dragging them into the sand.

Yes... We die like the sand, our bodies jumbled haphazardly amidst billions of grains of it, carried away to disappear amidst the dunes.

We kill heedlessly, recklessly, like one would plow forward into the sand, and when we die we are scattered like so many handfuls of grit. Our comrades, our enemies, both disappear into the desert, death taking them impartially and senselessly.

I can only laugh. Burying my head into the blackened sand, feeling the grains grasped in my hands flow through my fingers, knowing this is the truth, that this is all... I surrender, and laugh.

And even though it is all just part of my long dead past, the sound of the wind refuses to leave my ears. I can still feel the black sand at my fingertips.

Huddled in the darkness, I listen to the wind.

There is the smell of the sea breeze, sticky and heavy and moist. But the sound that echoes in my ears is the cry of the bone-dry death wind, still swirling across that blazing desert.

Chapter 1

Rock, once known as Okajima Rokuro, realized once again that the Lagoon Company's current job was quite possibly the worst it'd ever taken.

It wasn't rare for the Black Lagoon to transport guests. They were transporters, getaway drivers, and—depending on the pay—pirates. If you wanted a fast, nimble ship to ply the waters of the Malacca Strait, then you turned to the Lagoon Company.

Still, it wasn't like they could offer all their guests service with a smile. After all, the chances of a passenger who might find themselves aboard the Lagoon being anyone close to a good person was nearly zero. Quite the opposite, in fact. There were times when they found themselves saddled with people who, it seemed, would be hard pressed to find themselves welcome anywhere.

Case in point, their current customer.

Illuminated only by the dim light of the stars, the man sitting on the deck silently looked out at the roiling night ocean. He looked like a sea wraith, of the sort one would find in the ghost stories told by sailors.

His long blond hair looked as if many years had passed since anyone had dared take a pair of scissors to it, and the profile of his face was sallow and sickly, as though someone had only halfheartedly bothered to stretch his skin across his skull. At first glance, his ancient—no, corpse-like—appearance made it hard to accurately estimate his age.

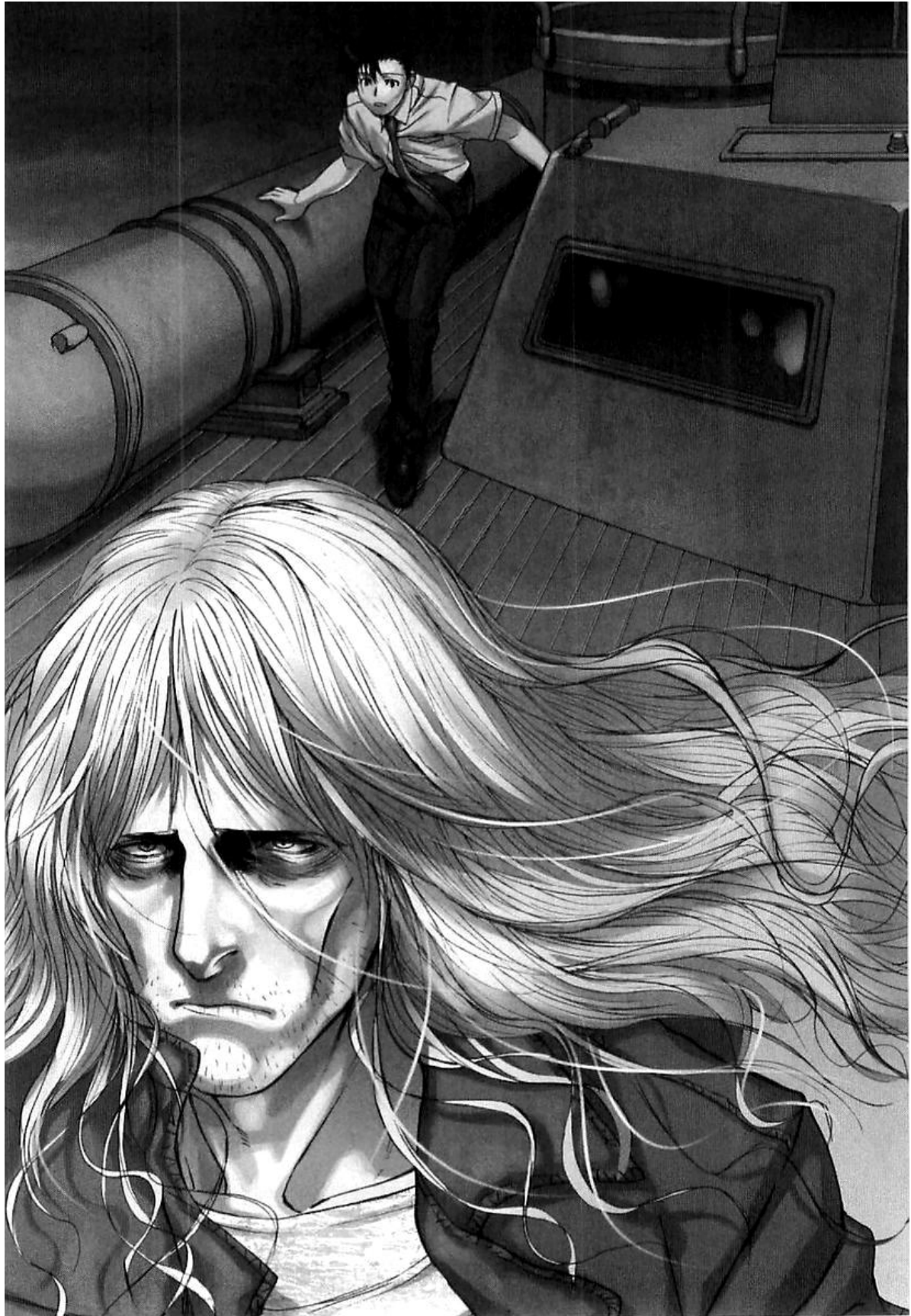
It seemed that the man didn't notice Rock approaching, for he remained where he was, gazing out at the black depths like a man possessed.

"Excuse me? Mister Stan?"

The man turned his head slowly, like a broken machine, to look in Rock's direction... Was he really looking? His eyes were so empty it was hard to tell. They were like twin caves; nothing could be seen inside them. Rock felt a chill pass through his body. It was like talking to a dead man.

"...Mister Stan, the captain wants to see you. It's almost time, so I think he wants to go over the plan before we go in."

"Mmm. Yes, I understand."



The man's voice, completely bereft of both will and spirit, served only to prove that he was not a corpse, nothing more.

No, perhaps not even that. There were those on this earth who walked and talked like the living, yet they were still dead inside.

It had only been about two years since Rock had thrown himself headlong into the underworld, but he could already tell that much. He could already tell just what sort of person the man standing in front of him was.

Stan slowly got to his feet, and Rock clearly saw him surreptitiously nudge some trash into the sea as he rose.

An empty ampule, and a wadded ball of cotton.

Stan's eyes, blacker than the night sea and filled only with empty darkness, were those of a heroin junkie.

Dutch and Benny were unable to hide their disgust as Rock came back to the bridge, Stan in tow. They too, it seemed, thought that this job was the worst one in quite a while.

Nobody liked to deal with the sort of people who'd burned out half their brains with overdoses of dopamine, and Stan was obviously a textbook example of a serious heroin addict.

From his place behind Stan, Rock silently tapped his wrist. *Our guest's just finished doping up.* Dutch and Benny noticed the gesture, and the disquiet on their faces only deepened.

"We're tracking the ship you were talking about on radar, but it doesn't seem to have deviated off course yet," Benny said, drawing a mark on the map, showing their path. He was a slim, nerdy looking type who appeared to be about as far from a man of the sea as it was possible to be. But his skills were beyond reproach, and underestimating him based on his appearance would prove to be a mistake.

"If they keep going like they are now, they'll cross paths with us in about twenty minutes or so. Just according to schedule, in other words."

"Okay then, let's go over the scenario one last time... Mister Stan, there's been no change of plans, right?" Dutch asked, taking over where Benny left off. The huge black man, bald and powerfully built, was the captain of the ship and also the leader of Rock's group. Normally a calm and reserved sort who kept his emotions hidden behind his Rayban shades, it was extremely rare for him to show such blatant disgust.

But Stan, his gaze still unfocused, only nodded slowly.

"...Look, are you sure? A hundred percent?"

Dutch pressed for confirmation, his voice lowering dangerously, but Stan just replied with a hazy smile.

"Why are you so worried, captain? All that we want is for you to pass in front of the boat, and leave us in its path in a rubber raft before you are noticed. Then you can stay back, delaying them with some choicely worded threats. While they are distracted, we will approach from their blind spot and take over the ship. I do not see how much simpler this plan could be."

"Easier than squeezing out a fart, no doubt. But you see, Mister Stan, I've got to admit I have my doubts you even know how to clench the muscles in your own ass."

It seemed that Dutch had decided to use this opportunity to express his misgivings without reserve. Rock couldn't blame him. For some reason, the heroin junkie standing before them had been picked by their client to lead a team of no less than a dozen pirates.

Stan, seemingly unfazed in the face of Dutch's harsh words—or perhaps no longer able to understand the meaning behind them—only shrugged.

"...Mister Stan. 10 minutes. That's how long we're gonna be your bait. If you can't take over the boat by then, we're hauling ass out of here. You can't get back here with what you want before time's up, same deal. I'm not waiting a second longer. You know that, right?"

"Of course. That is all we expect from you... Now, I must ask you to call my friends in the hold. I will be waiting on deck."

Stan nodded casually and staggered out of the bridge, looking as though a stiff breeze would be enough to knock him over. Silence fell over the men left staring after him.

At length, Benny shook his head as he looked at Dutch.

"...I still think it's in our best interests to turn around and head back to Roanapur as soon as they're on their raft."

"No can do, since we've taken their advance pay. If we want to turn tail and run, they have to make some sort of mistake that endangers the whole mission first."

"Not like that's going to be all that unlikely, you know."

Benny glanced at the hatch that led outside to the deck, and then tossed his head in the direction of the hold.

"Their leader's like that, and the other eleven *aren't much better*. I'd say those idiots wouldn't know a mission from an orgy. I don't want to get caught up in someone else's fuckups."

Dutch didn't seem to be too confident in Stan's chances of taking over the target with his motley band either, because he only crossed his arms and sighed instead of refuting Benny's opinion.

"...I agree with Benny, Dutch," Rock said, unable to keep to the sidelines as he usually did regarding jobs this time.

"I know we have a reputation to keep up, but there's no guarantee we won't fail spectacularly while trying to help those guys. And they're all outsiders who've got no connection to Roanapur, aren't they? Who'd blame us for leaving the-"

"Rumors have a way of crossing the seas, Rock. Roanapur's not the only place we do business, you know."

Even though he'd just shot down Rock's suggestion, Dutch still looked disgruntled, scratching idly at his beard.

"...It was a gamble to take on a job from a client we didn't know anything about in the first place. You two didn't say anything back then, either. Give it up."

...Granted, the members of the Lagoon Company *had* been extraordinarily desperate when they took the job.

Transporting contraband to Pangkal Pinang on their previous job had been all well and good, but having the people who gave them the stuff and those slated to receive it all go down in a police sting just before delivery... hadn't. The Lagoon's crew members were forced to dump all their cargo overboard before the trail led the authorities right to their doorstep. They shook off the police, but their moods as they pulled into Bangka Island with not a penny to show for their efforts were black indeed—especially true in Revy's case, as she was on her period. To complicate matters yet more, they managed to get caught up in a firefight at the tavern where they went to drown their sorrows. Dutch, forced to pay for the bullet-riddled walls and counter, was so angry that he fell murderously silent until the morning after.

That was when they'd met their client. A beautiful woman with fiery red hair, "Jane"—a fake name if there ever was one—had been a complete unknown. They'd never seen her before, and she approached them without going through an intermediary first. But she gave them an advance that was more than sufficient to cover that shaky start, and they all agreed that a little risk was probably better than returning to Roanapur empty-handed with their tails between their legs.

Their biggest mistake had been accepting the advance money before being introduced to the actual operation team. They hadn't taken Jane's assurance that she'd gathered only professionals at face value, but they'd thought, at least, that she was reasonably certain of the job being a success, judging from the hefty sum she'd given them. Never in their wildest dreams had they imagined the team would be such a collection of ragtag misfits.

The dozen who came aboard the Lagoon were, quite simply, beyond the imagination. If their junkie leader had been the only problem, then the Lagoon's crew wouldn't have been so pessimistic. But the stark reality staring them in the eyes—that the remaining eleven made Stan the druggie look almost normal—was what made the atmosphere on the bridge so bleak.

"Anyway. It's too late for tears of regret now, no matter what kind of fucked up shit they decide to do. Be prepared for the worst, and remember to keep *our own interests* first and foremost... Now, Rock. Be a gentleman and fetch our guests below."

Rock held up his hands, surprise coloring his expression.

"Uh... Me?"

Benny, quick on the uptake as ever, nimbly darted into the communications room and ostentatiously began to examine the machines there, a studied look of innocence on his face. He knew, like everyone else on the bridge, just how unlucky the one chosen to go down to the hold would be. It meant, after all, that the wretched soul would be facing Revy's wrath, after she'd been stuck in a room with the eleven other team members and forced to watch over them for over an hour straight.

"You're the only man for the task, Rock," Dutch said serenely, taking the helm.

"Considering how Revy must be feeling right now, I can't think of anyone else who can handle her... Mmm. Well... Good luck."

"Don't dump the responsibility on me!"

Revy realized once again that this was quite possibly the worst fucking job they'd ever taken.

She lit up yet another Lucky Strike and glanced inside the crinkled pack. Only one left. Once she finished smoking that, she'd be at her limit. She didn't think she could take any more.

The Black Lagoon's hold was far too small to comfortably host eleven people.

And if such cramped conditions were to be accompanied for over an hour by the voice of a woman clearly out of her goddamn mind, it wouldn't take someone with Revy's dangerous temper to decide that enough was enough.

"...So in the end, Admiral Guzman of Panama was so entranced by my ancestor's strategic genius in taking two forts with a force of just four hundred men that he sent a letter saying, 'Please send me a weapon that can tell me of your might.' Of course my ancestor, being a gentleman, courteously received the messenger and gave him one of his prized pistols, with a handful of bullets as well. 'Keep these safe for a year. I'll be coming to take them back myself,' he said! Can you believe it?! How awesome! My ancestor was soooo awesome!"

Her wavy blond hair and ample chest bouncing haphazardly about, the Caucasian woman kept on babbling, her squawking tones rising far above what anyone would consider an indoor voice.

Her name was Caroline Morgan.

Her blouse was adorned with an abundance of frills, and gold buttons flashed on the tailcoat she wore. With an actual honest-to-God tricorne complete with feather atop her head and an antique cutlass waving about in one hand to complete her ridiculous getup, she'd been recounting heroic 17th century pirate tales for the better part of an hour, looking for all the world like an actor at some school arts festival's play.

"Hmm. That's pretty tight. Those Caribbean pirates were some pretty bad mothafuckas, yo!"

The woman in the pirate costume thrust her chest out proudly. Probably an F cup, maybe even a G. Yeah, those were certainly tits to be proud of.

"Of course! And that's why I've kept up the tradition as the descendant of such a distinguished bloodline! To hell with patrol planes and AEGIS frigates! True warriors of the sea can prove their mettle with only a trusty cutlass and a flintlock at their sides!"

...And what made the whole scene even more of a goddamn farce was that eight of the remaining ten team members in the hold were dressed up much the same—wearing quilted vests and belts, with bandannas and eyepatches sitting on their heads. They looked like extras from a swashbuckling attraction at some theme park. It seemed that Caroline was their leader, but none of the other "pirates" seemed particularly inclined to support her in her exuberance. From their expressions, it was clear weren't really given to the same quirks as Caroline, and were just wearing the tawdry rags in accordance to their leader's perverse whims. At least, judging from the UZIs and Kalashnikovs they held, they seemed more determined than their captain to do their job seriously.

"...But hey, Caroline, was it? You really the descendant of the buccaneer Henry Morgan? Got anything to prove it?"

The only man who was deigning to converse with the pirate captain, affably encouraging her, didn't seem to be part of her band. But he, too, was decked out in a strange getup—though granted, not one that any trick-or-treater would likely choose to terrorize the night. VonZipper shades hid his eyes, while a New Era cap adorned his head. He wore a Phat Farm parka and shorts, which together with his Nike Air Max sneakers served to make him practically a poster boy for the hip hop gangsta style... Which wouldn't have looked too out of place in some club on the West Coast, but stuck out like a sore thumb in Indonesia. Of course, Caroline didn't seem bothered by it at all, thrilled as she was at finally finding someone willing to listen to her babble.

"Yo ho ho! I'm glad you asked. Now, look at this saber here! If you look closely, on the saber guard, you can see my ancestor's name carved right here!"

"Hmmm... But yo, if this's really Henry Morgan's sword, ain't it supposed to be hung up in some museum or somethin'? Izzit okay for you to swing this thing around?"

"It's fine! This blade wants to be bathed in the raging waves and hot blood! I'm sure my ancestor would approve!"

Just listening to her lilting voice would be enough to make anyone hard of hearing. Revy wished she could close her eyes and cover her ears - see no evil, hear no evil - but most unfortunately, she'd been charged with keeping watch over the source of all this cacophonous depravity. Honestly, there was no telling what these people would get up to if someone didn't keep them in line. Revy knew that a bunch of monkeys in a zoo would probably be more behaved than this lot.

Naturally, Revy had taken to completely ignoring Caroline and everything she said the moment they set sail. Caroline, who mistook Revy for a normal crew member, had immediately demanded that she bring them some rum and hoist a Jolly Roger on the head of the boat. Revy had merely replied with a glare that could melt steel and Caroline, concluding that she couldn't speak English, had stopped pestering her with absurd requests.

If not for that half-baked excuse for a rapper, Caroline would've shut up after that, damn it... Revy realized belatedly that the cigarette she held had turned into one long stick of ash while she was brooding. She muttered darkly under her breath and lit up her last one. Once she was done with that, she'd have no choice but to crib one from someone else. But she didn't want to talk to anyone in the hold if she could help it.

"So tell me, girl, whatcha doin' here? The piratin' biz not too good back home?"

"...Well, we attacked drug runners three times in a row, can you believe it? I mean, you can't tell them apart just by looking at them, right? But those cartel scoundrels didn't see it that way! Honestly! They were really out for blood. So I thought, the Caribbean's not the only place for pirating in the ocean, and maybe it'd be better to do some buccaneering elsewhere while the cartel calmed down."



"Ouch, babe... Musta sucked, yo."

"I know, right?! And, I mean, about the coastal guard! If they want to take down smugglers so badly, why don't they issue us letters of marque and let us be privateers, huh? Didn't those numbskulls pay *any* attention in history class? Allying with pirates is the most basic step to increasing a country's naval power!"

Revy could feel a migraine coming on just from listening. Fucktards, every single fucking one of them.

How long was that rapper going to keep chatting up the pirate bitch, anyway? Was he one of those sad fucks who got hard just talking to busty women?

She just wished someone would tell Caroline to shut the fuck up and quit yapping. Maybe it'd lead to an argument - or better yet, a fight. Then Revy could step in to "mediate," and if she ended up shooting one or two of them in the confusion, well, she was sure Dutch wouldn't mind too much.

But actually, there was one member of the team besides the happy fake rapper who wasn't a member of the pirate bitch's crew. And he was the only one in the hold who Revy fervently hoped *wouldn't* start anything.

He hadn't said a word since he got on. His silence didn't bother anyone, and in that aspect he certainly knew how to behave himself, but his very existence itself was so alien that nobody in the hold could ignore him, and his presence served as a subtle sort of pressure that bore down on everyone in the room.

He looked like one of *those*, but nobody wanted to come out and ask him about it. Not Revy, not the rapper, not the pirates, nobody. The hulking man, as big as a bear, was garbed from head to toe in solid black clothes that looked to be of Japanese make, his entire head except for his eyes covered in an ebon facemask. He sat cross-legged on the floor.

Was he a ninja? Well, he might very well be.

Of course, the blue eyes looking out from behind the facemask, and the blond hair sticking out over his forehead, weren't even worth mentioning.

Anyway, nobody in the hold could find it in themselves to ask him, "Hey, are you a ninja?" That was a relief.

After all, if he actually nodded and replied, "Yes, I am indeed a ninja," then everyone would realize in an instant that they had a one hundred percent certified mental patient on their hands who'd somehow wormed his way onto the team.

That was why every soul in the hold had silently resolved, without consulting each other beforehand, to "pretend" they didn't notice the huge man in the black mask.

Everyone had their own preferences in regards to fashion, right? There were people dressed up as Caribbean goddamn pirates here, for fuck's sake. They couldn't begrudge a raving Sho Kosugi fan his quirks.

"So anyway, baby, what's a lady like you doing takin' a job like this? What happened to your own ship?"

The fake rapper's question was surprisingly sensible, and Caroline suddenly looked down and blanched.

"Well, the helmsman came down with syphilis. And since nobody else knew how to take the helm, we left the ship in the first mate's care at a port in Macao."

"Wait... No one else knew how to steer? Ain'tcha a pirate? Family biz, ain't it?"

"The steersmanship techniques passed down through the generations in the Morgan clan only work on ships that actually have sails! What's with all this radar and GPS stuff?! I wish everything would just go back to the good old days."

"...But can't ya just hire someone else?"

"You have *no* idea how hard it is finding a helmsman who actually knows how to speak English around here, really. And when we actually found one, he refused for some reason."

"Yeah well, I guess he couldn't take the strict dress code, yo."

It looked like the rapper was finally at his limit, too, judging from the mocking tone in his voice, but Caroline didn't seem to notice.

"I wonder why. It's not like I'm asking for much, and I told him I'd pay double what everyone else does."

"Heheh. Generous one, ain'tcha?"

"Of course. You shouldn't underestimate the financial power of the Morgan family!"

The rapper shot Revy a quick glance that was loaded with meaning. Her instincts suddenly told her that something was up.

"So hey, then maybe you can just buy this boat, yo? These guys can understand English, an' I think they'd be okay in a fight."

It was obvious he wasn't serious in the slightest, but Caroline clapped her hands together delightedly.

"Great idea! I mean, this boat isn't the best, but I guess with a Jolly Roger mounted on it, it'd do in a pinch. And I can just fire the Chinese woman since she doesn't understand English!"

It looked like Caroline truly believed that Revy didn't speak the language.

But the rapper, it seemed, thought differently, because he turned to Revy and asked her, "Whaddya think, babe? Our cap'n here's made her decision, I think. A pirate's life for me, eh?"

...That was it. She couldn't take any more.

"Shut the fuck up already. You sorry fucks wanna get a Razzie like Geena Davis¹?"

Caroline flinched at Revy's sudden and violent outburst, but the rapper, having expected it, seemed to take it in stride.

"So you can speak English after all. Shame to keep quiet with a sexy voice like that."

Revy's gaze turned positively glacial at his familiarity. Was he putting the moves on her now that he was bored with the pirate bitch?

"Lemme tell ya here an' now. My job on this boat is to take anyone who acts funny and feed 'em a few bullets, got it? *You* don't start shit, and *I* won't have to end it. Now, if you really wanna keep on yappin' like a fuckin' poodle, then do it with the crazy bitch over there an' not me."

"...Huh? What, what was that?! How dare you!"

The rapper ignored Caroline, who was puffing up more and more with embarrassment and angry confusion, instead giving Revy a long, appreciative once-over. His gaze lingered particularly on her sides—to be precise, on the pair of custom holsters and the guns they held.

"Hey, hey, I didn't mean nothin'. I just noticed your guns a while ago. Ain't every day you see a 9mm Beretta longslide, and two of 'em at that. I like that kinda thing, see."

"Then go jack off with a copy of Guns & Ammo. Bathroom's over there."

"Aww, don't be like that. C'mon, lemme see 'em. I'll let you see mine."

¹ Actress who starred in the pirate movie and monumental flop Cutthroat Island, which actually didn't get a Golden Raspberry Award - it was only nominated for one.

Revy fell silent, temporarily stunned at the rapper's audacity. He was asking to see her guns like some grade schooler talking about trading cards. They were weapons that could kill a man with just a few pounds of pressure on the triggers, not toys.

"...Fuck off already, dipshit."

"I'm Jake, but you can call me UC," the rapper said, ignoring Revy's scathing glare. He grinned...

...and drew a gun from his clothes.

"...Wha-!"

A sudden chill ran down Revy's spine.

"So? Whaddya think? Mine ain't bad, yeah?"

If one were to describe Jake's gun in a word, it would be "stupid." The chrome silver slide immediately caught one's attention and drew it to the weapon, there were so many modifications stuck on it that it almost looked like a pistol meant for competition shooting, and there was even what looked like a laser sight mounted on a plastic frame.

To a professional, such a heavily modified gun was the height of idiocy. When life and death were on the line, all that mattered was, "Can it shoot bullets and kill someone?" Arguing about a couple millimeters difference in firing spread or the feel of the grip were luxuries that only amateurs with gun hobbies could afford.

If she were to rate the owner based solely on his gun, Revy would have put Jake on the same level of utter idiocy as Caroline. But...

"Now if you ask me, I gotta say that .45-caliber is the best. 9mm, the recoil just ain't there, y'know? The base here is a Colt, but there ain't a single piece of the original left. See, if you look right here..."

The glare that Revy shot Jake as he launched into a proud explanation of his weapon was infinitely cold and sharp. Her entire body was coiled and ready like a spring, the same as it would be on a battlefield where a second's hesitation could mean the difference between life and death.

Revy was an experienced gunslinger. She could tell when a person was about to draw their weapon just from the movement of their eyes, the tension in their movements. She read their intent through all of these things, and that was what allowed her to draw first and strike first.

Even if he hadn't drawn with intent to kill, Revy had had no intention of letting him even lay a finger on his gun as long as he was on the boat. They were nowhere near familiar enough with

each other for her to allow something like that. She'd been prepared to make him realize that, and make him pay for the lesson with his life if need be.

But... Jake had drawn his gun *so casually*, even faster than Revy.

She hadn't let down her guard. Sure, she'd underestimated him, but she wasn't so stupid as to miss something as potentially fatal as him reaching for his gun.

To the casual observer, Jake seemed like a simple idiot who couldn't read the mood as he continued boasting about his beloved gun. Revy alone realized just what he'd done.

He'd taken Revy off guard. He'd read Revy's breathing, her posture, everything about her, and then chosen the exact time she'd find it hardest to react. And then, smoothly and naturally, he'd drawn his gun, so casually he might as well have been stretching to yawn. The point was the nonchalant way he'd done it... This man's gun was even more familiar in his hand than his own cock. It was, to use a tired expression, almost like the gun was a part of his hand.

"Ah... that gun... Wait, omygawd! It's the UC Custom!"

Caroline, who'd been staring strangely at Jake's gun, suddenly let out a startled squawk.

"Wait wait wait, are you, are you *the* J? Ultimate Cool J?!"

"...Heheh, you're embarrassin' me. Never thought I'd meet a fan here."

"You have *no* idea! I check your site every *day*! ...Wait! Oh god! Are you going to write about this in Deadly Biz, too? Are you going to write about me?!"

"That's up to you, babe."

Jake flashed Caroline a perfunctory grin as she hopped wildly about the hold, squealing with glee, and turned to look at Revy.

"Now, lemme have a look at your gun, Miss Two Hand."

There was a taunt hidden behind his flirting that only Revy could understand. *I drew first*, he was saying. *If I was serious, you'd be dead right now.*

Revy spit out her half-smoked cigarette onto the floor. It had been her precious last smoke, but now it just irritated her, like a scrap of food stuck between her teeth.

"...Fine, I'll let you see it," Revy said, her voice a low breathy whisper that promised murder.

Jake didn't even have time to flinch in surprise as the cold, hard muzzle of a 9mm pistol suddenly appeared pressed against his forehead.

If Jake's draw had been the carefully calculated strike of a snake, Revy's draw could only be described as a bolt of lightning. To Jake, caught completely off guard, it must have seemed like a magic trick. Her fingertips had twitched just once, and the handgun had suddenly disappeared from inside her holster and reappeared in her gloved hand.

Jake had indeed drawn before Revy, but he hadn't pointed his gun at her. A taunt disguised as foolishness had been all he could manage. But Revy had drawn her gun fully prepared to kill. Even if he attempted to bring his weapon to bear now, Revy's finger would pull the trigger of her Sword Cutlass before he could do more than twitch. The hunter had become the hunted.

"He, hey! What do you think you're doing..."

Caroline's voice trailed off as though she was being strangled. The murderous intent radiating from Revy had dropped the room's temperature below zero.

"Don't put your life on the line for a joke, dipshit."

Any thoughts of the job they had coming up had already vanished from Revy's mind. Such complicated processes no longer had any place in her brain, which was now running purely on instinct. She wasn't the sort to laugh at unfunny jokes. That was all.

"A life ain't worth shit around here. But hey, no regrets, right? You were the one who bet it in the first place. And I'll be taking that bet, rapper boy."

"It's Jake, babe. UC Jake," he said calmly, as though a loaded gun wasn't set to his head. He reached slowly and carefully into his pocket with his left hand and drew forth a business card.

"If you go to the URL on this card..."

Revy didn't bother to finish listening; she struck away the card before her eyes with her free hand. But someone else stooped down to pick it up.

"Uh... Sorry to interrupt, but..."

Rock cleared his throat awkwardly, feeling his clothes sticking to his body from the sweat. In a way, he'd chosen the worst possible time to enter the hold, just moments before a bloodbath took place.

"We're almost there. Maybe you two can talk this over later?"

"..."

The situation was obviously past the point of peaceful negotiation, but Revy wordlessly withdrew her Cutlass and took a step back. The atmosphere slowly climbed back above freezing, and everyone let out breaths they only just realized they'd been holding.

"Come on now, let's all go up on deck. Mister Stan's waiting. Let's go."

Rock hurriedly shooed everyone out before things could get any worse. Caroline shot Revy a hateful glare as she left, and Jake, perhaps still not realizing just how close he'd come to death, leered suggestively at her before stepping out after the pirate captain.

"...To be honest, I wasn't expecting you to step down so easily," Rock said frankly after the last member had left, leaving the two of them alone. He reached for his breast pocket as he spoke, removing a cigarette from the pack there and handing it over to Revy. It wasn't a conscious attempt to placate her, just something as natural between them as breathing.

As for Revy, she took the cigarette as casually as Rock had offered it and lit up. Now that she thought about it, she'd started calming down like she'd already taken a drag the moment she saw Rock's face.

"I didn't back down because I felt like it. But I thought if I was gonna shoot him anyway, I'd rather do it in a place I don't have to clean up the goddamn bloodstains myself."

Rivy exhaled slowly, her cold eyes looking up emptily at the smoke... as though there was a future there that only she could see.

"I'm gonna end up killing that motherfucker. I know it."

A definite air of relief settled over the Lagoon as the assault team left on a pair of Zodiac rafts, even though the actual operation itself hadn't actually begun.

The rubber boats were soon engulfed in the darkness between the waves, becoming invisible to the naked eye. Meanwhile, the warning lamps of their target, the Zaltzman, were already shining over the horizon. The Zaltzman was an oil tanker, not a freighter, and though it did indeed transport oil, it also served a second purpose, that of supporting the captain's side job. That side job mostly consisted of petty smuggling, often involving works of art. Their target this time was one such work, small enough that it would be easily transportable on the Lagoon. Soon the Lagoon and the two rubber boats would position themselves loosely in the Zaltzman's path, and once it approached, the Lagoon would serve as a distraction to make it stop. As long as they didn't get horribly unlucky and a patrol boat didn't turn up, the Lagoon's 3,600 horsepower Packard engine, a detuned piece of equipment originally meant for aircraft use, wouldn't need to stress itself.

"A junkie, a rapper, and Blackbeard's pirate crew. I didn't know we were supposed to be filming a goddamn talent show here," Dutch muttered, taking a drag on the American Spirit clamped between his lips.

"There was a ninja too, Dutch," Benny added reluctantly from beside him.

"Ah, the ninja... Yeah. You're right. A fucking ninja."

It was clear Dutch didn't want to remember it, but the man's presence had been just too incredible to forget.

"Come to think of it... He wasn't carrying a gun, was he? I only saw a sword on him when he was getting on the boat."

"Beats me. You think he might have been concealing a bunch of weapons somewhere? You know... maybe some shuriken, or a blowpipe."

"...Hey, Rock. There a lot of folks like that where you grew up, I take it?"

From his expression, the question had been the last thing Rock wanted to hear, but unfortunately Dutch wasn't so kind as to consider his feelings.

"Sorry to disappoint," he said, "but the wonders of the Orient sold out back home a long time ago. If you want to hear about ninjas, you might be better off asking the turtles in the U.S."

The three of them had relaxed enough to joke around, but Revy stood alone, unsmiling, methodically cleaning her Cutlass. Dutch and Benny knew her well enough to surmise the reason for her anger, and they'd wordlessly agreed to leave her alone.

Rock had been the only one to see the commotion in the hold, and even he didn't know exactly how it'd come to that point. Still, he knew that Revy wasn't brooding simply because she'd gotten up on the wrong side of the bed.

Right now, the Lagoon's gunner, infamous for her hair-trigger temper, was *ready to fire*. There was no room in her for joking. Her two eyes were for aiming, and her finger existed only to pull the trigger as she waited for the crucial moment. She was like a beast of prey that had caught scent of an intruder in its territory.

Rock didn't make a habit of wishing misfortune on others, but just this once he could only pray that Jake wouldn't make it back to the Lagoon. The next time he and Revy saw each other, blood would be shed. And since the situation had already gone so far that only one person could possibly walk away from their meeting, it was only natural for him to prefer that the one who *wasn't* Revy exited the stage. Even if the entire operation itself went straight to hell and

they were forced to withdraw without the rest of their compensation, he thought now that it would be such a small price to pay.

"...Hmm? What's this?" Benny muttered to himself suddenly, looking at the radar.

"What's wrong, Benny boy?"

"There's a blip on the radar, coming in from two o'clock. Judging from the speed, I'd say it's... a helicopter, maybe? Whatever it is, it's heading right for us."

"Rock!"

Rock had grabbed the binoculars and started heading out on deck before Dutch even finished calling his name. He could see the searchlight of some sort of aircraft in the direction Benny had specified, and soon the beating noise of rotors made itself known over the roar of the sea wind.

"It's not a patrol copter from the Thai navy, is it?"

"No, I don't think so. It actually looks like a civilian helicopter..."

The crew waited, tense with anticipation, but the chopper soon passed over the Lagoon and continued on its way, seemingly without noticing their presence.

It was headed straight for the Zaltzman.

"Huh? Wait... Its blip just overlapped with the Zaltzman's. I think it's landed."

Dutch was already on the two-way radio, calling the assault team.

"This is the Lagoon. Mister Stan, do you copy."

"Loud and clear. What is it, Lagoon?"

"You've probably noticed it, but you have guests from the sky. Not part of the plan, is it?"

But Stan's voice coming over the radio didn't shake at all.

"It does not matter. Everything is going according to schedule. Do not worry about it."

"What do you mean? Explain."

"The object our client wants was never on this boat. It just arrived on the helicopter, just as planned. Now we are ready to attack."

Dutch's brow creased dangerously.

"...That's news to me."

"It should have no effect on your role in this plan. Now, please proceed in distracting the Zaltzman."

Dutch, overtaken by a sudden feeling of doom, couldn't erase the frown on his face even after the line went dead.

"...Something's wrong about this job."

The Zaltzman's silhouette loomed high over Rock, like a huge waterfall in the darkness.

Fifty thousand tons wasn't all that big for an ocean-going oil tanker, but compared to a PT boat like the Lagoon it was still like comparing an elephant to a mouse.

Of course, it wasn't like they were going to fight the boat head on - even a small collision could spell disaster for both sides, considering that the tanker was shipping crude oil. The Zaltzman's size meant that it would be slow to turn, making it easy to stop. Another point in their favor. Still, even taking all of that into consideration, the massive wall of steel that filled Rock's entire field of vision was an intimidating sight.

The Black Lagoon's crew sometimes had to force other ships to stop as part of a job, and without fail the poor schmuck who had to make the demands with just a loudspeaker clenched in one hand was Rock.

"Ah... Testing... testing... Umm... Attention, to the fine crew of the Zaltzman..."

Before finding a new life on the lawless seas, Rock had been a normal business man named Okajima Rokuro working at a large Japanese firm. Granted, "normal" had been a relative term—in reality, he'd been something of an elite, assigned to procure materials from overseas. He was fluent in four languages, specializing particularly in business talk. It was only natural for such an individual to take care of negotiations... At least, that was the excuse that Dutch gave every time he passed over the loudspeaker, but to Rock it just felt like he was going through some sort of rookie hazing ritual.

"Uhh... I know this seems a bit sudden, but, umm... Well, you see, we'd very much appreciate it if you stopped for a bit..."

Of course, the number of jobs where his smooth talking had brought the conflict to a bloodless end didn't even number one in ten. Normally, Revy would lose her patience and her RPG

launcher would end negotiations with a flat bark, followed swiftly by a fiery explosion, leaving things as though Rock had never said anything in the first place. And worse, Dutch had decided that the price for any grenades Revy happened to fire would come out of Rock's pay in an effort to make him work harder.

"Err... If you don't follow our demands, well, I'm very sorry to say this, but I must regretfully inform you that we will have no choice but to make you stop by any means necessary..." Still, this time the weight on Rock's shoulders wasn't quite as heavy as usual. There was no Revy at his side, snickering ominously as she got her RPG launcher ready to fire.

While the Lagoon served to distract the Zaltzman from the front, Stan and his team were surely approaching on their rubber rafts. One of them would sneak on board using a grappling hook and then lower an emergency ladder for the rest to climb up.

It was a plan that could only succeed because it was night, and their target was a large ship. The Lagoon didn't need to *make* the ship stop through their own power, and so there were no plans for Revy to take up her anti-tank weaponry. If all went according to the scenario, Rock's threats would never amount to anything more than empty bluffing.

"They saying anything?" Dutch asked Benny offhandedly as he watched Rock hard at work through the bridge's windows.

"...Hmmm. Nothing yet. This is giving me a bad feeling."

It seemed that Benny was starting to feel suspicious as well. More and more worrisome aspects made themselves known the more they thought about it. The overly generous advance pay, the ridiculous team they'd been given, the deliberately hidden information...

"Hey, Dutch... Do you think that maybe the trouble we got into in Pangkal Pinang was just the beginning, and we're in for more bad luck?"

"Don't say things like that, Benny boy. You'll jinx us."

Dutch was just lighting up another American Spirit when it happened. Something that none of them could have predicted.

The Zaltzman's speakers came on, a light metallic squeal fading away to be replaced by the smooth, dignified voice of a man. His dulcet tones rang out over the night sea at full volume.

"Ah... hello? Am I correct in presuming that the familiar voice making a commotion in front of our ship belongs to none other than a member of our fine friends from Roanapur, the crew of the Black Lagoon?"

Upon hearing that unmistakable voice, Dutch dropped his just-lit cigarette, cursing in surprise. The same shock swept over Benny, Revy, and even Rock, who was still out on the deck.

"Wha... Mister Chang?!"

"Working hard is all well and good, but I can't say that I approve of you trying to hijack a tanker that belongs to the Triad. Well, I suppose that if you didn't know who owned this ship, we can simply chalk it up to bad luck. Move out of the way, and all will be forgiven."

Chang Wai-San was a powerful mafia boss of Roanapur, the Lagoon Company's base of operations, and head of one of the four great organizations that held power over the entire city, the Triad. He was one of Dutch's regular patrons, and someone who they'd never dare think of crossing, even in their wildest dreams.

They couldn't begin to imagine why Chang, who by all rights should have been relaxing in a penthouse on Palkana Street, was on a ship in the middle of the ocean, but they had no time to leisurely speculate on the circumstances. Whatever had led to these events happening, the fact of the matter was that they'd just helped an armed assault team make their way onto a ship occupied by Mister Chang.

Dutch blanched as he realized the seriousness of the situation and bolted into the radio room, snatching the mic from Benny's hand.

"Captain, do you copy! If Mister Chang's there, get him on the line right now! This is a fucking emergency, dammit!"

Leaving his body in the care of the sea winds, Stan focused his attention on the voice of Chang Wai-San coming from the speakers.

He stood at the top of the Zaltzman's forward mast, positioned so that he could take in the vast deck and the bridge all at once. The rest of the team, as well, had climbed up from their Zodiac rafts and moved into their pre-ordained positions.

Judging from what Chang had just said, it seemed he was acquainted with the crew of the Black Lagoon. He hadn't heard that from his client, and the development represented a serious threat to the success of the mission, but it was too late to turn back now.

No, he had to turn this into an opportunity.

Stan knelt, bringing the night vision scope he'd prepared in advance for his Dragunov sniper rifle to his eye, and cushioned the gun against his shoulder. The ambient light gathered and magnified to turn the world bright green, letting him see the faint outlines of the people on the

bridge. The poor resolution of the night vision scope wouldn't allow him to properly distinguish faces. But having heard Chang's voice come from the speakers, it was a safe bet to say that the figure holding the mic was none other than the man himself.

The shape of the stock was familiar to his hands. Just the feeling of the hard matter in his hands, on his shoulder, blew away the hazy fog of drugs in Stan's mind like a spring breeze, leaving it clear and sharp... Yes. This feeling would never betray him. It would never leave him. It let the corpse-like man do the only thing he *could* do anymore—snipe.

About a hundred and sixty meters to the target. That in itself was far from difficult, but the fierce sea wind was blowing at least ten meters per second. Most snipers would have chosen to give up, but Stan was different. The wind was not his enemy. He felt it, knew its every aspect, had always held it close as an ally. Stan could read the wind, not through some complicated theory or hard-won technique, but simply through sheer natural talent. It was thanks to that talent that he'd managed to survive in the hellish desert. His fearsome skill had earned him the nickname *Shaitane*², a name voiced by his enemies in hushed whispers...

The quiet pull of the trigger. The thunderous shot. The recoil against his shoulder. The shock lighting his brain afire. His sight flashing, inverted for just a second by the muzzle flash. The darkness of night turning into blinding light, the salt smell of the sea into the dry scent of the desert...

He'd had pride, once, when he was there. He'd felt terror grip his heart. He'd had a mission to fight for, dignity to uphold, and comrades at his side to share the burden and make the fight worth fighting.

They were the last remnants of the time when his life still had meaning. The flashback of those long gone times shook Stan to the core.

...He fired rapidly, methodically dropping the silhouettes in the bridge one by one. One shot every two seconds, six shots total. Out of those, four had been kills. Unfortunately, he'd missed the most important first shot. The target had suddenly thrown himself flat just as Stan pulled the trigger, as though he'd felt the crosshairs on his body. He must possess incredible instincts, honed by countless life-or-death battles.

Stan was unperturbed, continuing his search for targets with his scope's sights while whispering into the ear-mounted microphone hanging next to his mouth.

"All team members, assault the bridge. I will take out everyone I see in the windows facing the deck. Try to force the enemy into my sights, and don't stand there yourselves."

"Loud and clear."

² Arabic for "devil."

Stan held his Dragunov in a perfect firing stance, sensing the state of the sea behind him by hearing alone. The sound of the approaching engine would be the torpedo boat they'd used to get here. He wondered briefly how the Lagoon Company would react to the situation.

He raised the radio that was tuned to the frequency he'd agreed on with the Lagoon's crew, different from the one he used to contact his own team members.

"Lagoon, I did not ask for your support. Stay where you are until we are finished."

...No reply. It seemed they'd decided to cut ties with the assault team. It didn't matter that the Lagoon had chosen local ties rather than the job at hand; such a development had been well within his expectations. Dismissing them from his mind without a further thought, Stan contacted his own team.

"Attention, team. The Lagoon Company has allied with our enemies. Going with Plan B."

"Gotcha. But I got something to ask you."

It was a simple command, but Jake, who should have already been inside the bridge, apparently felt it necessary to butt in.

"Don't stop the Lagoon guys if it looks like they're gonna come up on board, yo. Especially the chick with two guns. That bitch is mine."

"..."

Stan frowned. His sights were already set on the silhouette that had just scaled the emergency ladder hanging from the tanker's side and begun running toward the bridge with nary a sideways glance. It was definitely the Lagoon's female gunslinger, making her way up from the boat as it docked next to the tanker.

It was obvious she was headed there to protect Chang. It would have been common sense to snipe her there and then, but Stan deliberately threw away his chance for a killshot. His haphazardly composed team was composed of people who didn't know each other, didn't trust each other. At times like this it was sometimes better to cater to others' whims than make the efficient choice and risk a falling out with the mission's success on the line.

"Roger. The woman is already heading your way. I will leave her to you, Jake."

"Aight, sweet, bro. Glad I got a leader who knows how to listen."

"Next... Falcon, it's your turn. As we discussed earlier."

"...As you will, so shall it be done."

Confirming that his last subordinate had heard his orders, Stan put down his Dragunov for the moment and raised the flare gun he'd prepared beforehand above his head, firing a signal shot into the sky.

Now his other allies waiting elsewhere would know that there had been a change in plans.

"Yo ho ho! Tremble with fear and say yer prayers, ye bilgeswabs! The Tortuga³ Pirates are here!" Caroline shouted as she made her way into the ship, dancing about as she waved her saber wildly through the air. She looked like she was having the time of her life. Her huge breasts swung ponderously about, making it yet harder to pass by her in the narrow hallway.

Jake sighed, noticing how the men behind Caroline were clearly having trouble making their way past their captain. It seemed that choosing to squeeze his way past her before she could barge in had been the right choice after all.

Stan's shots had already alerted the crew to the presence of intruders, and the warning sirens were belting out a raucous cacophony that echoed through the ship. They could hear the shouts of the tanker's confused crew, but the way sound rang through the complicated hallways made it impossible to judge where they might actually be.

...Suddenly, the door in front of Jake slammed open and a swarthy Arab ran through. He must have been a crew member who panicked upon hearing the sirens and decided to make a run for it. Unfortunately, he'd happened to choose a route that sent him running straight into the intruders themselves, and his face twisted with terror as he realized his situation.

Caroline's eyes shone as she caught sight of her first hapless target and stepped forward aggressively.

"Avast, ye scurvy scallywag! Tell us where the treasure is if ye value yer life! We already know ye be a'smugglin' priceless works of art!"

"Wha, wha—"

Even as the man fumbled for words, hopelessly confused, Jake slowly pressed his gun to his belly and mercilessly pulled the trigger. A robust bang echoed through the hall, and an added note of panic mingled into the confused shouts of the crew.

"Wait a second! What're you doing?!" Caroline screeched, her good-natured roguishness suddenly vanishing and giving way to shock.

³ Tortuga is an island that's part of Haiti, infamous in the 17th century for being a base of operations for Caribbean pirates.

"Wha, what the hell, J?! You just killed an unarmed man in cold blood! You should have asked him where the treasure was first!"

"The hell would he know? Wasn't no treasure on this ship in the first place, babe," Jake replied calmly, giving the limp corpse at his feet a kick for good measure. The blood that had rushed to Caroline's face as she flushed with anger drained just as quickly, leaving her comically pale.

"What...?"

"I mean, there was never any art on this ship. The treasure here ain't some shitty painting. It's something more exciting an' worth taking."

He'd just killed a man, but Jake's laughter was flippant and nonchalant as ever. He continued talking to the team, giving them their new mission as though he was telling a particularly amusing joke.

"Our real target here is Chang Wai-San, an officer in the Triad. Nothin' complicated about it. Shoot first, ask questions later. Just don't shoot 'em in the face. Gotta check an' make sure we got the right guy, know what I'm sayin'?"

This was news to Caroline, who'd been just as clueless as the crew of the Lagoon as to her team's real objective. There was no way she'd have accepted had she known. She'd thought that her mission would be a noble excursion in the name of traditional pirating, not an assassination.

"You, you can't be serious! That's just senseless killing! Look here! Real pirates stick to a set of gentlemanly rules even when they're wielding vio—"

Jake didn't bother giving the Morgan pirate clan's distinguished scion a chance to finish. He simply sighed, raised his UC Custom, and fired. Caroline died instantly as the bullet struck right between her eyes, her face still frozen in an expression of anger, her lecture forever unfinished.

His voice became a roar as he turned to face the suddenly pale pirate crew, dominating them before they could get a hold of themselves.

"Now it's time to make a decision, bros! You gonna turn an' run cos you think you still gotta do what this dead bitch woulda wanted, or you gonna go with me and walk away from this rich? C'mon, what'll it be, huh?!"

The men looked awkwardly back and forth, at Jake as he laid out his ultimatum, and then at the corpse of their former employer, who had been a bit strange in the head but still exceedingly generous with her pay. Still, there wasn't a man among them who hadn't felt embarrassed at being forced to dress up as a pirate.

"...How much you paying?" one pirate asked, ripping off his eyepatch and tricorne with a distinct air of satisfaction.

"Five grand just for taking the job. Four times that for the lucky boy who takes out Chang."

"I'm in."

"Me too."

"Me too!"

The former pirates, now killers, looked at each other and nodded, grinning and snickering like hyenas. Jake smirked at their pragmatism and held a moment of silence for the laughably unpopular pirate captain... Half a second, to be exact.

"Aight, now that that's done... *get down!*"

The barrel of Jake's UC Custom shot up as he shouted, and the killers instinctively crouched without even knowing what was going on.

Jake's .45-caliber ACP bullet roared over their heads and buried itself in the corner of the corridor they'd just come down, sparks flying everywhere. Revy, who'd just rounded the corner and had been moments away from opening fire with both Cutlasses, was forced to spring back behind cover.

"Shit..."

Revy snarled to herself and stuck one Cutlass around the corner, firing blind down the hall. The killers, realizing they were sitting ducks, hurried further down the corridor as Jake covered them with fire from his UC Custom.

"C'mon, Two Hand! Let's boogie, baby!"

Revy just snorted at Jake's arrogance and shouted back, "A dumbfuck like you would look better dancin' cheek to cheek with a drowned body, asshole... I'll send you sinkin' right now so you can look for a partner!"

"Honestly, Dutch. There are mistakes, and then there are *mistakes*. I thought you were sharper than this."

Chang Wai-San's voice over the radio was utterly calm, devoid of even the slightest hint of anger. But Dutch was in no position to reply with light conversation.

"I don't know what to say, Mister Chang. I sent Revy over just now. She'll clean up everything."

"My, that's certainly a relief. I suppose we can just sit tight in the bridge for now?"

"Yeah, if you could do that I'd be really grateful."

On the outside it looked like Chang was being cold, but in reality it was quite the display of generosity. By letting Revy put herself in danger's way alone without endangering Triad members, he was giving the Lagoon Company a chance to regain some of their good name.

"Though to be honest, I'd rather you took care of the sniper who's stationed himself at the head of the ship... I might sound calm right now, but even as we speak, I'm actually lying flat on the floor. I must look like an idiot."

"...Just stay there a little bit longer. I know this sounds stupid, but the team we carried over there is made up of amateurs. They won't be a problem for Revy."

"Well, we'll see."

The line went dead and Dutch let out a huge sigh.

Upon learning just who the tanker's owner really was, the Lagoon Company had unanimously agreed to void the contract they'd accepted in Pangkal Pinang.

"Mother *fuck*... We got played for fools."

Still, there was no changing the fact that they'd set themselves, no matter how briefly, against the Triad. One mistake now would put the Lagoon Company in severe trouble.

"Well, I guess we just have to believe in Revy now," Benny said. "It's not like she'll have any problems against that bunch of junkie-led idiots... I think. Probably."

Benny's calm seemed like it was the product of resignation rather than belief in Revy's skills.

"...But you know, I wonder if they thought we'd just keep helping them after we learned we were up against the Triad. Or did they think they'd be able to keep us in the dark until the end?"

If the Lagoon chose to leave them, the assault team would be stranded in the middle of the ocean even if they succeeded in subduing the oil tanker's crew... Though, considering their actions up to the present, it was entirely possible that they hadn't actually bothered thinking that far ahead.

"Dutch, that flare we saw from the forward mast still bothers me. Do you think they have some sort of boat ready to make a getaway without our help?" Rock asked.

Dutch nodded and said, "...Yeah, I see where you're coming from. Rock, arm the torpedoes. Benny, keep an eye on the radar."

"Right."

The two headed out, Rock to the deck and Benny to the communications room. Dutch took the helm, grasping the steering gear in his hands, ready to get the Lagoon moving if a naval battle broke out.

Benny glanced at Dutch, and suddenly saw from the corner of his eye a black figure detach itself from the shadows in the corner and dart across the room.

"Dutch! Behind you!"

Dutch's survival instincts had him throwing himself out of his seat without even bothering to look around. His quick reactions ended up saving his life. A pure white blade, engraved with jagged lightning-like designs, sliced keenly through the air where Dutch's head had been just a moment before.

"The *fuck*..."

Sprawled flat on his ass, Dutch could only look up disbelievingly at the black shadow standing before him. The man standing there was decked out in ninja garb, looking like he'd come straight out of some bad comedy movie. But after nearly losing his head to an actual sword, Dutch somehow couldn't find it in himself to laugh.

He couldn't even begin to fathom where the man had come from in the first place. The only answer that made sense was that he'd hidden himself away somewhere in the cabin, but Dutch had clearly seen him board the rubber rafts with the rest of the assault team with his own eyes.

Still, it was no time to be sitting around gaping with surprise. Dutch shuffled frantically backwards, drawing his trusty Smith & Wesson M29 from its holster. Being a large man, Dutch had no trouble wielding the magnum revolver, which was capable of taking down large beasts of prey.

But before he could bring the barrel up to aim, the ninja removed something from inside his uniform and threw it to the floor. Instantly, a thick wall of choking smoke spread throughout the bridge, making it impossible to see anything.

"Motherfucker!"

Dutch swore vehemently, but he wasn't stupid enough to wade into a close-quarters fight with his sight shut down. He scrambled to his feet and set his back to the wall, keeping his magnum ready as he carefully withdrew.

He didn't know how it had happened, but it was clear that the assault team on the Zaltzman hadn't forgotten to leave saboter on the Lagoon. The question was, what was the ninja after... Dutch immediately realized the answer, but by then it was already too late. A quick series of sharp crunches came from the direction of the steering device, which was still blocked off by a wall of smoke.

The enemy hadn't been after Dutch, but the machinery Dutch had been controlling. With the steering gear broken, the Lagoon had lost, at least temporarily, the ability to move about freely. The crew would have no choice but to sit and count the stars until repairs were made.

"Son of a bitch!"

Dutch fired three shots into the smoke, relying mostly on instinct. But there was no way he could hit a target he couldn't see.

"What's going *oaack*?!"

Rock's voice, coming from the hatch that led to the deck, suddenly became a surprised squawk, followed immediately by a small thud as though he'd fallen over. No, Rock hadn't fallen over. He'd been pushed.

"There!"

The bridge was still choked with smoke, but Dutch knew his own ship's layout like the back of his hand. He ran through the room without pausing, making his way to the hatch leading outside. Rock was still sitting on the deck, looking confused.

"Dutch?! So-so-something just ran by me! Something black!"

"Where'd he go?!"

Dutch lowered his center of balance, holding the magnum in both hands as he searched the deck. The ninja had to have hidden somewhere after running out of the bridge. Perhaps he was even thinking of ambushing them again.

"Benny! Get me all the grenades you can carry from the armory! Move it!" Dutch shouted over his shoulder, moving slowly over the deck with his back to the bridge wall. Rock followed clumsily behind. He was a liability, but it wasn't like Dutch could leave him alone—Rock had no combat training whatsoever, and letting him fend for himself would be no different from killing him outright.

"Hey, Dutch. Was that thing just now... a ninja?"

"Don't ask. If I reply seriously I think I'm gonna lose whatever dignity I have left," Dutch muttered, then suddenly perked up as he remembered the low-budget films that had been popular years ago.

"You know, in the movies, if there's a Japanese guy in the cast and something like this happens, it always turns out that he was a ninja in disguise, too. Well, Rock?"

"...Dutch, I'm begging you. Don't expect things like that from me."

Dutch kept on his toes even as he joked around with Rock, and so he didn't miss the sudden flash of motion in the corner of his eye.

"There you are!"

The barrel of his magnum tracked a black shadow as it darted out from behind the torpedo tubes, sprinting toward the gunwale. A huge splash soon followed. It seemed the enemy was planning on making his escape by sea.

Dutch leaped over immediately and emptied his gun into the ripples, but the inky depths made it impossible to tell if he'd hit anything.

Just then, Benny dashed out from the deck, panting with exertion, carrying in both hands a box marked with the ever-trusty warning "**EXPLOSIVE.**"

"Dutch, I got the grenades!"

"Give me those!"

Dutch thrust both hands inside the wooden crate, coming up with a grenade in each hand. Pulling both pins at once with his teeth, he lobbed them into the ocean around where the ninja had jumped in. Another two soon followed. In total, four grenades disappeared into the sea at five second intervals, detonating in the water and creating huge geysers.

The terrible shock caused by underwater explosions couldn't be compared to midair shock waves by any stretch of the imagination. There was no way anyone could have escaped the force of four concussions of such magnitude by swimming in such a short amount of time.

"...Rock, shine the light over there."

Rock focused the bridge-mounted searchlight on the surface where the last ripples from the explosion were just fading away. In the strong light they could clearly see the water stained crimson, a tattered scrap of black cloth tossed about on the waves like a rag.

The barrel of Dutch's magnum was still smoking as he shoved it decisively back in its holster. But the words that came from his mouth had little to do with exultation despite his victory. The smoke had finally cleared, revealing the completely destroyed console inside the bridge.

"...Goddammit. I can't tell whether these people are stupid or professionals. Someone tell me!"

"I'd say we're the stupid ones, since we're the ones getting our asses handed to us," Benny remarked markedly, but Dutch didn't even have the energy to get angry at him.

"And that fucker just now! The hell did he come from?! I know I saw him get on the raft and leave just a while ago!"

"He must've swum back here after the Zodiacs left, I guess. Then he hid himself away somewhere inside..."

"...You're telling me he did all that and the four of us didn't notice a thing? Huh? Tell me, Rock!"

Rock looked up helplessly at the night sky, *Why me?* written all over his face.

"Well, uh... Ninja do have this skill that they use to move undetected through the water..."

"Hmph. I see. So this sort of thing must be common knowledge in Japan, huh."

"Wha, what? No, it's not! Of course not!"

"Hey, both of you. Quiet down a little. Can't you hear something?" Benny said, and Dutch and Rock shut up and listened. Indeed, there was an unmistakable sound coming from the west, that of a cruiser-level engine moving through the sea.

Rock turned the searchlight in the sound's direction and sure enough, in the very farthest reaches of the light they could see the faint silhouette of a moderately sized cruiser churning up the waves.

"Shit, like I thought... Those fuckers had a boat ready to take our place."

"Dutch, how about the Gepárd rifle?"

The Lagoon had a Hungarian Gepárd anti-materiel rifle on board, ready for use in case of emergencies. But after staring hard at the cruiser as it passed by far away, Dutch could only shake his head irritably.

"It's a moving target that's far away, in the middle of the night. Nobody but Revy could make the shot."

Their weapons expert still hadn't returned from the tanker. It seemed the world was conspiring against them at every turn.

"Benny, get a clear picture of that ship, at least. We'll make them pay sooner or later."

"Gotcha."

Benny headed back inside to get the camera equipment. Dutch and Rock were left gazing up at the tanker jutting up from the sea beside them, consternation clear on their faces.

"...If Revy got all of them, then that ship'd have to go back empty-handed," Dutch mused. The faint sound of distant gunfire drifted down to them from the tanker, unending.

The killers in the Zaltzman somehow found themselves in a standoff.

That wasn't to say that the two opposing forces were evenly matched. In fact, it might have been more accurate to say that the fight was one-sided. The troop of men armed with submachine guns was being subdued by one woman wielding a pair of pistols.

Instead of advancing through the ship up to the bridge, Jake's team had been forced to retreat again and again, finally herded all the way back into the engine room.

Dutch's expectations hadn't been misplaced, and neither had Chang's trust. Once she was in full killing machine mode, "Two Hand" Revy became a wrathful angel of death, come straight from the Book of Revelations. Unable to stand against her despite the fact that they held a clear advantage both in numbers and firepower, the nine men had already lost two of their number. Granted, their utter lack of cohesion due to the loss of their leader acted as a definite handicap, as did the narrow hallways that kept them from using numbers to their advantage. But even taking that into consideration, Revy's skill was leaps and bounds above theirs.

Though they'd made their way into the engine room, where the complicated tangle of metal would let them set up ambushes and pincer attacks, they were unable to make their way past Revy. That was why the situation could be described as a standoff.

Considering he was in charge of a team that was getting trounced soundly by a single woman, Jake wasn't the slightest bit perturbed. Rather, he found himself enjoying his current circumstances so much, he wished he could give up on his original mission of assassinating Chang.

That two-handed gunslinger... her friends called her "Revy," right?

He'd known she was something special the moment he laid eyes on her. The very air about her had told him she was dangerous; it was the kind of atmosphere that only hung about experienced gunslingers. Jake trusted his instincts.

And damn, those spunky almond eyes. The tribal tattoo on her right shoulder, taunting him. The daringly cut denim pants—pretty much hot pants, actually—that led the eye to her unashamedly bared thighs... he couldn't resist her. She had more than enough talent to be a *character*. Jake supposed that in a way, he'd been wandering the streets of the underworld all this time, trekking across half the world, just to find a woman like her.

There was just one feature on his beloved UC Custom that didn't have to do with enhancing its deadliness—the small lens fixed just underneath the barrel. At first glance it looked like a laser sight, but in reality it was a compact CCD camera. Besides his work as a killer, Jake had a side job that he'd taken up for both fun and profit, and the movies recorded by his tiny camera were a crucial part of that business.

His camera had already captured many titillating snapshots of the female gunslinger as she wielded her guns akimbo. He might have the opportunity to get even better pictures if the fighting got fiercer. To be honest, he couldn't care less how many of Caroline's former team happened to die in the firefight. Jake just wanted to keep enjoying the dizzying dance of bullets.

On the other hand, Revy was unable to shake off the vague sense of foreboding that hung over her, though she'd more than held her own against nine to one odds.

The two Cutlasses she held were keener than her eyes, more sensitive than her lips—they were her fangs, so natural in her hands that one could almost believe she'd been born holding them. That was how she felt the clear sense of wrongness in the struggles of her prey as she bit down... She couldn't feel the anxiety unique to the hunted emanating from beyond the barrels of her guns.

She had no evidence to support her feeling, but Revy could still instinctively sense Jake's flippant playfulness. There was nothing that sickened her more, but she knew that losing her temper and taking the fight to Jake would only be playing straight into his hands.

"Hey, Two Hand! Whassup, babe? You ain't comin' at us no more! You tired or sumthin'? Up past your bedtime? Want me to tuck you in?! You want your mommy?!"

She could hear the mocking voice from beyond the metal jungle, but the echoing cry of the diesel engines in the small room made it impossible to tell just where it was coming from. Jake knew it just as well as she did, of course, which was why he'd felt safe taunting her. If she lost it now and ran out after him, the others lying in wait were sure to ambush her.

"You're really pushing it, you son of a bitch..."

The engine room with its complex system of twists and turns was actually ideal for a single fighter to take out multiple enemies using guerrilla tactics. But Revy found such strategies annoying—creeping around carefully while nervously glancing every which way just wasn't for her. Even sitting still like she was now, waiting for her enemy to make a move, irritated her more and more with every passing second. She wanted to just set the goddamn room on fire or something and barbecue all the assholes alive. Come to think of it, just sinking the fucking boat would be a sure way to send them to the bottom of the sea. It would be a sight to match the Titanic. Damn, the idea was sounding better and better the more she thought about it. Revy was so agitated that she'd already forgotten just why she was fighting against Jake's team.

The sudden scent of expensive cigarette smoke cutting through the oily air served as an abrupt reminder that brought Revy back to reality, making her remember in an instant just who was in charge of the Zaltzman.

"...What're you doing sitting down on the job, Two Hand? It really doesn't suit you, you know. I didn't think that meditating was your style."

Everyone's gazes locked onto the unknown man as he walked casually down the hallway to stand beside Revy, his shoes echoing crisply on the metal floor. Vintage teardrop sunglasses hid his eyes from view, and his hair had been brushed back immaculately and held in place with pomade. His pure white muffler and inky black trench coat fluttered slightly, the colors forming a perfect balance of yin and yang. Everything about him radiated style and panache. Who could have predicted that he would show himself? He was none other than the Kan Yi Fan Triad's Pak Tsz Sin⁴, the man known as the Walking Dude... Chang Wai-San himself.

"Wha... Sir! What're *you* doin' here?" Revy stammered, caught off guard and guiltily realizing she'd been seriously considering sinking the boat. Chang merely blew out a leisurely stream of smoke.

"Well, you know. I promised Dutch that I'd keep my people from getting hurt..."

He paused for a moment and shrugged languidly.

"So I thought to myself, there wouldn't be a problem if a guy *who wouldn't get hurt anyway* decided to go out for a little stroll, right?"

The easy, exuberant grin on his face belied the audacity in his words. That endearing aspect had earned him the nickname of "Babe"—though it seemed that Chang himself disliked the moniker.

Chang's reasoning was so flawed it wasn't even worth taking seriously, but Revy immediately accepted it as the truth. Of course, Chang was generous enough to give Dutch the opportunity to save some face. But there was no way the blood flowing through his veins was so cold that

⁴ An administrative position that sits together with the Hung Kwan and Cho Hai on the third tier of the Triad power structure, below the Shan Chu (head) and Heung Chu/Sin Fung (vice heads).

he could stand by and watch after having to suffer the indignity of crawling on the floor to avoid a baptism of bullets.

Before Chang the mafia boss came Chang the man. To him, it was only natural to step forth onto the battlefield himself, even if he had to leave his underlings behind to do it. Though he was probably the most important person on board and was in fact Jake's target—something that Revy had no way of knowing—there was one solid, universal truth that transcended all such petty concerns: there was no way on God's green earth that the bullets of trash like Jake and his cronies *would ever hit Mister Chang*.

"Now, Revy. Don't let me down. If you're having trouble getting this party started, just ask for the song you want," Chang said lazily, drawing his guns from the twin holsters at his back. He held a pair of Beretta M76s decorated with custom grips—double pistols, just like Revy. They were named Tin Dai Shuang Long⁵.

"...Heheh. Got it, sir," Revy said, shaking her head in admiration as she stood up. That fucker Jake could stand to take a few lessons from Chang. This was how you asked a lady out.

"This won't even be a challenge if you're with me. Let's take 'em all out."

"Okay."

The two of them walked out from cover and into plain view, standing tall, not stooping disgracefully.

The excited killers, not ones to miss such a golden opportunity, eagerly sprang out from behind their cover, bringing their SMGs to bear. But the two cool stares and the four handguns behind them didn't miss a single movement.

Nobody could take the stage as the Cutlasses and the Tin Dai began their earsplitting quartet, snapping out a skillful beat that sent three of the killers immediately crashing to the ground in a wild spray of blood.

"Th-the fuck?!"

Jake could only watch, his eyes wide with shock. When Chang first appeared, he'd almost laughed aloud at his good fortune. But that had been because his client had told him that Chang Wai-San was nothing but an antique has-been, his once-vaunted skills having rusted away to nothing after he took an administrative position in the Triad.

⁵ 天帝双龍 (Heavenly Emperor Twin Dragons).



Reality hit him hard, like a slap to the face. If his client thought the man walking into the room was a has-been, he didn't want to know what she thought a real gunman was. In his eyes, Chang was closer to a supernatural phenomenon than a human being.

Revy alone had been skilled enough, but with a monster like that as her partner, his chances of defeating her in a straight fight had just plummeted to zero.

He had no choice but to go back to square one. Attempting to turn the tide here would be nothing short of suicide. Staring death in the face, Jake's mind kicked into high gear.

"...Stan, we're in deep shit, yo. They got the ace an' jack of spades together now. We need to beat it," he said hurriedly over the radio, and heard a soft sigh of disappointment from the other side.

"So be it. Signal the retreat. Our ship is already here. I will cover you as you flee."

With the decision made, there was no need to tarry in the killzone the engine room had become. He didn't like cutting his date with Revy short, but there'd be more chances as long as he made it out alive.

"...Everybody make a run for it! Fall back for now! Get the hell outta here!!"

Revy and Chang had advanced into the middle of the room, leaving the corridor leading outside wide open. They spun around immediately as Jake and the three remaining survivors bolted for the exit, and the fire from their guns claimed yet another victim. Still, the rest made it around the corner, heading back through the hallways toward the deck outside.

Revy threw back her head and laughed, finally relaxing as she watched her enemies flee like cowards.

"Hah, those dumbfucks. The hell do they think they're gonna run?"

But Chang, having heard concerning news from Dutch beforehand, wasn't so optimistic.

"I heard that they have another boat ready, and they broke the Lagoon's steering gear. We can't let them reach the deck. If they make it there, they might actually get away."

"What...?"

The amusement vanished from Revy's eyes like a dream, replaced with pure murderous intent.

"Those shits just won't lay down an' fuckin' *die*! Dammit! I'm gonna kill every last one of those motherfuckers!"

Her face set in a bloodthirsty rictus, Revy bolted down the hallway in hot pursuit. Chang could only sigh as he watched her go.

I think that really flipped her switch.

He couldn't just let her go, though, and so he had no choice but to follow.

"Revy, don't run out on deck! There's a sniper on the front mast—"

"So what?! Bring it on!"

The hatch leading outside was already wide open—Jake's team probably hadn't had the time to close it behind them as they fled. And just as Chang had feared, Revy leaped straight through the open doorway without care. The next instant, the roar of Stan's Dragunov split the night as though it had been waiting for her.

"Fuck?!"

The 7.62mm Russian-made bullet missed by a hair, just barely brushing past Revy's shoulder and leaving a friction burn in its wake. The dark and the strong sidewind had no doubt acted as significant handicaps, but pure dumb luck had been a far greater factor in saving Revy's life. Her body immediately sensing imminent danger, Revy threw herself flat against some nearby plumbing, instinctively putting herself out of the sniper's line of sight.

"Shit..."

She peeked out from behind her cover and saw Jake and the two other survivors running toward the emergency ladder like bats out of hell. It was on the side opposite to where the Lagoon was docked. The getaway ship that Chang had mentioned was probably already ready and waiting.

If she attempted to lean out and shoot Jake, the sniper on the mast was sure to get in her way. She had to get rid of him first, but the distance was far too great to take him on with a mere pistol.

"...See, what did I tell you? Listen to me and you'll live longer, I guarantee it," Chang said teasingly, finally coming up from behind Revy. She didn't know where he'd gotten it, but he held a G3 assault rifle with a night vision scope attached to it in his hands.

"I'll cover you while you run out and take care of those three. Not too much to ask, right?"

"Of course not!"

Chang nodded and poked his head out of the hatch. The next instant, almost like Stan had predicted Chang's movements, a bullet flashed through the darkness and forced Chang back behind cover before he had a chance to bring his rifle to bear.

"Sir?!"

Chang shrugged sheepishly toward Revy. He was unharmed, but the G3's plastic foregrip had been shattered, rendering the gun useless.

"...All right, so much for that plan. We'd need an artillery team if we wanted to flush out the guy on the mast."

"You've gotta be shittin' me..."

The enemy's sniping skills were out of this world. Even Revy, who'd been nearly out of her mind with rage, was forced to calm down.

It was actually pretty preposterous, if one thought about it. The sea wind blowing across the deck was so strong that a man walking against it would have to lean into the gale, but Stan had unhesitatingly sent bullets screaming through those air currents and pinned them down.

She couldn't think of anyone in the band of costume parade failures who might possibly possess such skills. Digging into her memory, she recalled that most of the people in the hold had been armed with assault rifles and SMGs. There hadn't been a single sniper rifle in sight.

The only one with an unknown weapon... yeah, their leader, Stan or something. He'd been holding a rifle case as he got onto the rubber raft. And he'd had a clunky piece of equipment strapped to his back as well.

*...You're telling me that **he's** the sniper up there on the mast? That junkie? A sniper? Fuck no.*

Revy could only watch as Jake's team disappeared over the side, gritting her teeth. But they still had a chance. The sniper keeping Chang and Revy under lockdown would have to move down from the mast to the ladder in order to escape as well, and to do so he'd have no choice but to enter their range.

That was going to be their opportunity. The sniper would have no chance in close quarters against Chang and Revy together. If he really was Stan, capturing him alive would give them an even greater edge. The assault team had been sloppily put together, but nevertheless Stan had been appointed as their leader—he'd know just who was behind this ridiculous plan.

At length, the sound of an unfamiliar boat's engine revving up came from beside the tanker. Sure enough, there'd been a getaway boat waiting at the bottom of the ladder. But the noise

was too loud to be anything but... Revy's eyes widened. Were they actually leaving? With only Jake and the other two in tow?

The engine's roar faded away into the distance. She couldn't see it with her eyes, but Revy could tell from the sound alone that the getaway ship was leaving.

"The fuck... They just left the sniper behind!"

Just how messed up were these fuckers? They'd left the sniper at the mercy of their enemies, even as he covered his allies' escape to the last moment.

"...Well, it looks like that's it for the fellow up on the mast," Chang said from his place behind the bridge's entry hatch, a note of pity entering his voice.

"No matter how good he might be, he can't be Charles Whitman up there forever. We'll take care of him somehow or other."

"You got a smoke grenade or somethin', sir? If you can just keep him from seeing me for a second, I can run up there and get him."

"Don't rush things and do something you might not be able to regret later, Revy. I understand you must be annoyed, hunkered down there, but—"

Chang suddenly trailed off, staring up at the forward mast.

"...What is he doing?"

Her curiosity piqued by the wonder in Chang's voice, Revy peeked out cautiously and followed his gaze upwards. They could see the sniper get up from his kneeling stance behind the railing. It was hard to believe, but it *was* the junkie.

And Revy finally realized what the equipment Stan had had on his back as he boarded the raft was.

From the very beginning, Stan had known that things might come to this worst case scenario—that he might have to cover his allies' retreat until they reached the emergency ladder and made their escape. He'd already told his team members what to do in case that happened, and he'd also explained how he'd get away once they were clear.

Jake and the others hadn't abandoned Stan, per se. Stan himself had merely decided that he could make good on his escape alone, since the wind blowing on deck was *more than strong enough for him to do so*.

The top of the mast, where he was, was maybe 40 meters above the ocean's surface. The view was dizzying from such a height, but it was actually too low for Stan's purposes. The parachute he carried was made to be used at more than ten times that height. If he were to jump from where he was, he'd have to rely on the sidewind, like a parasailor.

Stan stood on the edge of the railing, felt the direction of the wind one last time, and pulled the ripcord on his parachute with nary a moment's hesitation.

The chute spilled out of the pack and spread limply out into the open air, instead of shooting upwards like it would have had he been in free fall. Still, the canopy caught the wind soon enough and snapped upward, dragging on the rigging line.

Finally realizing what Stan was planning, the two gunslingers looking up from the bridge began to move. But Stan was faster, snapping off a series of quick shots in the standing position to keep them locked down. He couldn't aim anymore and the chances of them taking a random bullet were close to zero, but once he took off he wouldn't be able to fire at all. He had to keep them at bay until the very moment he leaped, in order to prevent them from shooting him out of the air.

The chute, filled with the wind, freed Stan's body from the confines of gravity. Stan rolled off the mast and began to move roughly through the air as though a invisible giant had grabbed him in its hand.

Immediately, he locked the Dragunov into place on his back and grabbed the control strings in both hands, controlling the canopy. The getaway ship that Jake and the others had boarded was already heading downwind as they'd previously agreed. The distance was... iffy, but he thought it should work. The real problem was going to be landing precisely on the narrow cruiser's deck.

Don't forget the training you endured... Stan reminded himself, coolly guiding the chute. Remember the skies of your past battles, how you entrusted yourself to the winds. If you are still a warrior, if you still deserve to live... your body will remember everything.

Silently, following the cruiser's blinking signal lights, Stan sank into the black sea.

The parachute was already out of pistol range by the time Chang and Revy made it to the head of the ship. Unwilling to let Stan escape without at least making an effort, Revy squeezed off three shots at the retreating figure, but the gunshots disappeared into the darkness of the sea without a trace.

Far away, the parachute canopy rose up into the sky as though it had lost whatever was dragging it down, then fell back down into the waves, swept to the side by the winds. The cut-away handles had been pulled... which meant that the parachuter had landed safely on target.

The enemy cruiser's signal lights went out as well. They had no way to see where Stan's team was running anymore.

"...Fuckin' fuck! You shitheads! I'll kill you all, you sorry little cunts! That's a motherfuckin' *promise!*"

Revy's angry shouts were swallowed by the depths of the night, leaving nothing behind, not even an echo.

Chapter 2

"...Well, the Zaltzman originally belonged to another organization in Amsterdam, but we had a bit of a falling out and the Triad ended up taking possession of it. It looks like a normal oil tanker from the outside but there's a fake floor under the tanks, and a hatch on the bottom of the ship that can open to let small submarines dock. It's supposed to let you smuggle things onto land without actually having to go into port. You could stock up from Roanapur while passing through the Malacca Strait and head straight for the Western Coast without anyone being the wiser."

Chang stopped for a moment, pausing to light up a cigarette with a Dupont Classic lighter.

"We kept the original captain and crew from Amsterdam, but we couldn't exactly throw them a welcoming party - the official route had them passing *by* Roanapur, you see. *They* couldn't stop, so I decided to drop in by chopper in the night and say hi. Unfortunately, I was taking a guided tour of the ship when everything went to hell. Rock, if I'd been on the bridge then, I would've been able to recognize your voice right away, and maybe then things wouldn't have had to come to this..."

The Black Lagoon's bridge was crowded to bursting, but Chang held himself easily, as though he was reclining on a sofa in a high-class club. Chang Wai-San could change the atmosphere through sheer force of character, no matter where he might find himself.

A long hour passed before Benny finally managed to fix up the Lagoon enough to start limping back home to Roanapur.

Stan's team had been smart enough to leave a saboteur on the Lagoon to keep them from pursuing; it was really no surprise that the assault team had destroyed the control gear on Chang's helicopter as well. The repairs on the chopper had shown no signs of being anywhere near finished when the Lagoon was judged seaworthy, and since Chang was a busy man, he'd politely asked them to give him a ride to Roanapur. That was how they ended up where they were now: transporting one of Roanapur's most prominent dons and his posse of bodyguards, the air in the bridge almost electrically charged.

"Did anyone know about your schedule tonight, Mister Chang?" Dutch asked, but Chang only shrugged affably.

"My whereabouts at any given moment aren't exactly a secret. We're not going to be finding many clues looking around there, that's for certain."

"...Mister Chang," Rock said, taking advantage of the lull in conversation to butt in, "I'm almost certain that the people behind this aren't from Roanapur. Everyone knows that we often deal

with the Triad; you're one of our best customers. It's clear that whoever contacted us at Bangka didn't know the state of things around here."

"Maybe, and maybe not," Chang said neutrally, keeping his gaze fixed on Rock. "You see, Rock, there's one possibility that can turn your entire theory upside down... And that's if the Lagoon Company was out to kill me in the first place."

"Sir-"

Chang held up one hand, stopping Revy cold.

"Naturally, we've known each other for quite a while, but we're not quite at the level where we can blindly trust in each other just like that, wouldn't you agree? There are four dead men on the Zaltzman who'd say yes."

That wasn't to say that Chang Wai-San himself suspected the Lagoon Company of foul play. If he'd been even the slightest bit suspicious, there was no way he'd have so carelessly put himself in their hands by asking them to give him a ride to Roanapur.

But such *personal* feelings of amicability had no place in this situation. Chang was the head of the Triad's Roanapur branch, and as such, he was obligated to make decisions which would be seen as fair even by those who had no idea of the relations between him and the crew of the Lagoon.

"...So what you're saying is that you want us to take responsibility for this mess, Mister Chang?"

"Since you can't actually prove your innocence, I'm afraid that's the way it has to be... though it's not like you're completely out of luck in that respect. Isn't that right, Revy?"

"Huh?"

Revy started as Chang suddenly called her name.

"Try and remember what those punks on the Zaltzman said right before they retreated. 'Fall back for now', if I recall correctly. They haven't given up. I'm sure they'll keep on trying to kill me even after we're back in Roanapur."

Chang's smile was so calm that nobody would ever have thought that he had been - was *still*- the target of an attempted assassination.

"I'm willing to bet that the getaway ship turned right around and headed for Roanapur. They'll hide like rats in the shadows, waiting for a chance to strike at me. So, my friends, all that remains is for you to find them first, and take care of them. Then everything will be settled."

"I see..."

Dutch let out a deep sigh, but Revy's smile was like a slash of darkness across her face.

"That's just what I was hoping for. Gotcha loud an' clear, sir. Next time I visit ya I'll bring a couple'a severed heads along with me."

"That's the spirit, Revy."

For Revy, this was more than just showing the Triad she was still trustworthy. Call it personal, but the thing that bothered her most was that she hadn't been able to kill Jake right then and there. The reality staring her in the face, that a worthless fucker like him had taunted her so blatantly and was *still breathing* somewhere out there, filled her with a rage that she didn't want to share with anyone else.

"...Sorry to interrupt the heartwarming bonding session here, but can I butt in for a second? I've found a clue already," Benny said as he made his way into the bridge, emerging from the communications room where he'd been busily typing away at his computer.

"Remember how we snapped a picture of the ship that came for Stan's team? It was dark, so the image is pretty crappy, but I managed to touch it up enough so that you can at least read the name."

"Awesome, Benny boy."

Everyone gathered around to look at the monochrome image Benny provided. The picture was severely pixelated, but they could still make out the letters on the side of the cruiser.

"This looks like... Cyrillic. Rock, can you read it?"

Language was Rock's specialty. He massaged his forehead as he concentrated, opening the dictionary in his mind.

"Nifrit... That's Russian for jade, if I remember right..."

"The Nifrit?"

The slight note of tension that entered Chang's voice was there and gone in an instant, but unfortunately none among those gathered in the bridge was so slow on the uptake as to let it pass.

"You recognize the name, Mister Chang?"

"...I think I remember hearing it somewhere. I'm not quite sure, actually," Chang said, attempting to pass it off as nothing. But he soon realized there was nothing to be gained from

hiding things now and sighed, cigarette smoke rushing out in a whirl as he muttered in a low voice, "If my memory serves me right... Bougainvillea Trading uses a ship with that name. It belongs to Balalaika."

Balalaika...

The silence brought by that name was welcome to no one.

Bougainvillea Trading was located on a corner on Satanam Street, in an antiquated Western-style building that brought to mind the island's long-gone French settlers. It was an open secret in Roanapur that the building - and the company itself, for that matter - was just a front for the Thai branch of the Russian mafia, Hotel Moscow.

The Russian mafia's presence in Roanapur wasn't quite as large as the Triad's, but they were still feared like the devil's own due to their incredible cruelty and viciousness.

In other words, the doors to Bougainvillea Trading were actually an unassuming portal to Hell, and any poor soul who dared to step through them without permission would be forsaking all hope.

To Dutch, Hotel Moscow represented a fine customer, one that paid for his services even more often than the Triad... but it had been a long time since he'd paid them a visit uninvited. And considering the reason for his stop today, he found that his mood was even fouler than he could have imagined.

"...So that's why you chose to make a morning call today, hmm? What an annoying little story."

Her quiet start to the day already in shambles thanks to the unsolicited visit, the Russian mafia's female leader snorted, the still-beautiful left side of her face twisting with scorn. One didn't even need to look at the other half - after all, there was no way the horrendous burns scarring the skin from her right eye down to her right cheek could betray any emotion.

The woman who stood at the head of Hotel Moscow's Roanapur branch was known only as Balalaika. Those who thought lightly of life called her Fry Face, but only the extremely powerful or the extremely stupid would dare utter the name in her presence.

The hulking man standing behind her was Boris, her right hand. The sight of his expressionless visage and the wordless pressure he exerted at his master's side brought to mind a lean Doberman, bred and trained as a killing machine.

"All right, I understand. Babe was attacked by a ship we own and wet his pants with fear, did he? Hah, how surprised he must have been. I only regret that I couldn't see the look on his face with my own eyes."

The office where Balalaika had received Dutch was lit only by the sunlight filtering in from the windows, a heavy sort of peace - like a fresco painting - holding the room still. No matter how hot the South Asian sun beat down outside, in this office, the air was always as icy as the winter of the frozen north.

"This is no laughing matter, Balalaika."

Dutch pushed the matter onto the table, his expression betraying nothing.

"Even the hint of your presence lurking behind the bastards who attacked Chang Wai-San is a bad omen to the people in this city, *worse than a shower of acid rain*. You know that as well as I do."

"Of course. And it's true that there were events in the past that might lead one to hold such misgivings. If Chang and I were to fight *once more*, even Saint John wouldn't be able to foresee the bloodbath that would ensue."

Balalaika's tone was light and airy, but the laughter in her voice died long before it reached her eyes.

Dutch didn't know for sure what kind of living hell she'd endured in her past, though many whispered amongst themselves that she'd fought for the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. But one thing was for sure about the former soldier: one only needed glance into her eyes to see the fires of purgatory there, burning eternally. Unlike the smile on her face, the look in her eyes - so cold it burned - wordlessly sent out a flat message.

If the world were to end tomorrow, this woman would be humming the polka as she watched it burn.

"...I jest, Dutch. I didn't expect you of all people to be so concerned. I place much weight on Hotel Moscow's friendly relations with the Triad. I haven't forgotten, either, the blood that was spilled to reach this point. Don't you remember, Dutch? You had a *first class seat* to the whole thing, after all."

"Yeah, how could I forget."

He'd intended it to be a light rejoinder, but the memory of the horrific bloodbath he'd experienced left Dutch's throat suddenly dry.

"I don't want to go through anything like that ever again if I can help it, and I'd like to believe that you think the same. That's why I decided I'd better come and see what you had to say first, instead of snooping around behind your back."

"Always a gentleman, Dutch."

The razor sharp smile Balalaika flashed belied her complement. She held up the monochrome photocopy that Dutch had given her once again... the picture of the Nifrit.

"You're right, this is the Nifrit. And Bougainvillea Trading did own it. Until three days ago, that is."

"Three days ago?"

"It was stolen. There didn't seem to be an ulterior motive, so we only filed a theft notice. You can ask Watsap for the details."

One might question the purpose of filing for theft to the police in Roanapur of all cities, but it was more a matter of preventing unwanted confusion in case the stolen goods were misused, rather than an actual attempt to catch thieves.

"...Gotcha. If that's what happened, I guess all I can is that that's a pretty unfortunate coincidence. Do you have any idea who might've been behind it?"

"None whatsoever. I was about to ask you the same question. If you knew, I could hunt them down and grind them into chiburekki ⁶ filling."

"Well, if you wanted a clue... there's this."

Closely observing Balalaika's face, Dutch placed an object made of brass onto her desk.

A spent casing. Revy had picked it up from the deck of the Zaltzman. It was from the rifle the sniper had used the night before.

"...You recognize it, don't you?"

"Naturally. I see this morning is just getting worse."

A 7.62x54mmR cartridge, of Russian make. During the second World War, the cartridge had made exclusively for use with the Soviets' trusty Mosin-Nagant M1891/30. But in modern times, with the world poised to enter the 21st century, there was only one rifle in the world that still used these cartridges.

⁶ A sort of fried dumpling popular in eastern Europe, typically filled with minced meat and onions.

"The SVD⁷. To us, it's a rifle as close to our hearts... No, even closer, than our own families."

"I hear that snipers are a pretty picky bunch when it comes to choosing their guns. Is that true?"

Balalaika's poker face didn't waver in the slightest in the face of Dutch's pointed question.

"Indeed. If I found myself in such a situation, I would choose the very same weapon."

Balalaika saw Dutch's bet, and he raised in response.

"The sniper shut down Chang and Revy cold, shooting through a sidewind at a distance of over a hundred and fifty meters. Then he paraglided off the mast onto the deck of a moving cruiser. Balalaika, what do you think of that?"

"The sniper in question is skilled with his Dragunov, and equally skilled in using a parachute. He must have been a paratrooper... Probably one who went through extreme training in a special forces unit."

Sergeant Boris's expression stiffened with anxiety as he stood to the side and watched the conversation continue, words flying deadly keen like a dance of blades.

"...So, does anyone with a skillset like that spring to mind?"

Dutch threw out his last bluff. But Balalaika, calm as ever, raised without turning a hair.

"Any one of my Vysotniki would be more than up to the task."

"...I give up. I can't take you on like this."

Dutch folded, holding both hands up in defeat as he sighed. He'd done all he could with what few cards he had in his hand.

"If you haven't eaten yet, would you care to join me for breakfast?" Balalaika offered amicably, as though she'd forgotten all about the razor-sharp exchange of words and intents that had supercharged the office just a second ago. But Dutch felt the need for a bracing smoke to calm his nerves even more than honey and tea.

"Sorry, but I'll have to refuse. I need to talk to Leroy too. You know how they say time is money... though lately it seems deflation's setting in with a vengeance."

"My. Then perhaps next time. Contact me if you pick up any clues; I might be able to help you."

⁷ **Снайперская винтовка Драгунова** (Snayperskaya Vintovka Dragunova), the Dragunov sniper rifle.

"Sure thing. Until then."

Dutch stood up and opened the door to leave, but found himself confronted by a woman in the open doorway. It seemed she had just been poised to knock. Despite her unflattering attire, she was quite beautiful... though at any rate, a complete stranger.

"Ah, excuse me," Dutch said lightly, nodding as he passed by her into the hall.

His next destination was the office of the information broker, Oswald Leroy, though he had his doubts as to whether the visit would yield any results. Still, he had to keep an eye out for anything unusual happening in Roanapur, just in case the killers out for Chang's life decided to make their move.

By the time he exited the building, walking out into the blinding sunlight of Satanam Street, Dutch had forgotten all about the stranger he'd run into a few moments ago.

"I hope I'm not interrupting. Comrade Balalaika, may I have a moment of your time?"

If looks could kill, the glare Balalaika shot at the woman who'd run into Dutch would have struck her dead right then and there. Using the fact that Dutch had left without closing the door as an opportunity, the woman didn't even bother to knock as she strode languidly into the office. Telling her "no" would have been an exercise in futility even had Balalaika felt inclined to attempt it. After all, Tatiana Yakovleva's job was all about uninvited entry.

She was dressed in a generic grey business suit, one that brought to mind the cloudy skies of Moscow even in the sweltering heat of Southeast Asia. She wasn't ugly by any stretch of the imagination, but her short chopped brown hair - cut more for efficiency than elegance - and the thick, blocky glasses she wore, would have been more than enough to turn any playboy's sights elsewhere.

"Do I even want to know why you're sticking your nose into my business this morning?"

Balalaika's demeanor as she faced Tatiana made her recent unpleasant encounter with Dutch look like a joyous springtime celebration. Her light blue-grey eyes hardened, becoming the color of arctic glacial ice.

Balalaika disdained Tatiana, and didn't bother to hide said disdain even in her presence - no, she deliberately chose to show it exactly because Tatiana stood in front of her now. But for Tatiana's part, the humble smile on her features faltered not the slightest, as though she wasn't put out at all by Balalaika's open scorn - or, perhaps, as though Balalaika's feelings meant nothing to her at all. It was only natural that any conversation between two such individuals, be it held in the morning or at night, could not help but be a display of hostility.

"Comrade Balalaika, have you broken your fast this morning? Perhaps we could-"

"Perhaps we could not. Just the sight of you shoveling kasha⁸ into your gaping maw would be enough to kill my appetite."

"My, how fierce we are today," Tatiana said, smiling brightly as though she'd been complimented.

"If you have the time to invite me to your idea of an elegant breakfast, then you have time to get to work, even if you have to live on a diet of salt. I've lost track of how long it's been since you sauntered in here to play at auditing."

"I'm terribly sorry to say this, but hasn't it occurred to you that it is perhaps your hostile behavior which is the greatest impediment to my work, comrade Balalaika?"

The shadows deepened in Tatiana's smile, and somehow, a poisonous sort of seductiveness began to appear about her, though she was dressed in clothes that were a far cry from those designed to accentuate feminine beauty. Perhaps this was her true self - perhaps her allure was like a fluorescent insect, shining brightly only in the cold, damp depths of darkness.

"I cannot help but mention that I happened to hear that one of your ships was stolen recently. May I inquire as to why this was not brought to my attention? You know as well as I do, surely, that it was undeniably a great loss."

"...So you were eavesdropping as well. Just how deep into the mud are you Cheka⁹ willing to sink?"

"All part of a day's work, I'm afraid."

Most probably, Tatiana had merely pretended to run into Dutch, and in reality had been listening in on them since their conversation began. Balalaika's expression became, if such a thing was possible, even colder.

"Weren't you only supposed to look at last year's accounts? I don't recall you being tasked with snooping about regarding this month's affairs."

"Oh, no... Oh, no, no, no, comrade. You must realize that your own stubbornness is forcing me to become even more careful and scrupulous than before."

⁸ A sort of porridge made of rice or barley, often eaten at home in Russia and the rest of eastern Europe.

⁹ Soviet intelligence organization which eventually became the KGB.



Tatiana waltzed over to Balalaika's side and then, as though she was sitting in her own office, hoisted herself up easily onto the corner of Balalaika's desk. Boris's expression froze solid at the sheer audacity.

Removing her unappealing glasses, Tatiana looked over her shoulder at Balalaika, her eyes almost seductively half-lidded. Her movements brought to mind a carnivorous plant spreading its sticky leaves in search of prey.

"Bougainvillea Trading's management of its finances and goods is far too shady and incoherent, by *any* standard I can think of. In other words, too many elements of this branch are decided solely by a single individual... namely, you, comrade. Surely you know as well as I do that such a system goes against the standards of Hotel Moscow - against the very beliefs of our people."

"Beliefs, you say... Hnn."

Balalaika snorted, slowly reaching out with one hand. The motion was so natural, so quiet and unobtrusive, that Tatiana had no inkling of what Balalaika was planning until the hand grasped her by the collar.

"What do you believe in, Cheka? Tell me. Will you sing to me the glorious anthem of the bygone Bolshevik Party, perhaps?"

Caught completely off guard and unaware by the sudden display of violence, Tatiana was unable to hide her fear. Face to face with Tatiana, their noses almost touching, Balalaika slowly breathed in the faint smell of that terror, savoring it. She was like a hunting hound that had pinned down its prey with one paw.

"...I'll tell you just one thing. The shadow that sprang forth from the foolishness that *you* call belief... That is *us*: Hotel Moscow. Don't forget this. You might try to curry our favor by selling us your fake smiles, but *we* are simply biding our time, waiting for the right moment to strike at your throats. Run about until that day comes. Run, to where you won't offend me with the sight of your face."

Tatiana gathered up the last remnants of her pride, keeping the stiff smile on her face. Trying her best to hold onto her authority as an auditor, fighting not to struggle, she asked Balalaika another question.

"...Why... did you hide the Nifrit's theft from me...? Was there something... you wanted to hide?"

"It was because just talking to you brings curses to my lips. Unless I absolutely have no other choice, I'm not going to tell you a single thing from now on. That's how things are done here in Roanapur."

Her ultimatum delivered with a ringing finality, like a nail being driven home, Balalaika let go, pushing Tatiana away.

"It would be better for you to finish your work and get out of my sight as fast as you can. Spending too much time in a foreign place like this won't be good for your health. I can guarantee that."

"...How crude you're being, comrade," Tatiana blustered, fastidiously setting about fixing her rumpled clothes in a futile attempt to save face.

"Even if you are innocent, you should have made sure that the negro would keep his mouth shut. Maybe you could have warned him more directly, or taken care of the matter in a... *cleaner* way. Think, what will happen if he begins gossiping about what happened here?"

Tatiana smiled a dark and dusky smile, as though she was savoring the thought.

"A man using an antique sniper rifle from Eastern Europe, and showing off his parachuting skills as well... could he be anything else but Spetsnaz? Such a man attacked Chang Wai-San and then made his escape on a boat owned by Hotel Moscow. Anyone with a sound head on their shoulders would conclude for certain that Fry Face was behind it all. They would think that she had finally decided to settle her old grudge."

Tatiana had hoped that Balalaika would show some sign of anxiety or nervousness, but unfortunately for her, Balalaika was well aware that Dutch was a tight-lipped man who knew the meaning of honor.

"Flee from this city, then, if you think things will get dangerous. I can't say for certain that the bullets will only fly at you from the front if things go beyond the point of no return... and one more thing. The SVD is a fine rifle, built for durability and rapid fire over accuracy. But if you insist on slandering it by calling it *antique*, I can prove you wrong, at a distance of 600 meters."

"..."

Tatiana would have dearly loved to offer a stinging retort of her own, but though light taunting and verbal fencing could be dismissed unofficially as part of her job, choosing to confront Balalaika directly would be a clear violation of her professionalism. Things would be a different matter if she had some sort of undeniably damning evidence, but as things stood, the caution driven into her by the nature of her job kept her from making a move.

Wordlessly shooting Balalaika a dark glare that promised revenge, Tatiana left the office.

"I'm sorry you had to bear witness to such a farce, comrade Sergeant."

Boris, freed from his stint as a silent statue, praised his commanding officer's restraint in his own brusque way.

"Not at all. The tantrums of the politruk¹⁰ are nothing new. We should be thankful that she's not staying, if anything."

With the fall of the Soviet Union, many criminal organizations had expanded their power bases by taking in members of the USSR's public institutions, and Hotel Moscow had been no exception. Former members of the disbanded KGB, in particular, often brought their hard-won espionage networks along with them when they joined, proving especially useful to the illegal interests of their new masters.

But the effect brought by these refugees wasn't entirely positive. The strange and irrational bureaucracy which had been the greatest shortcoming of the Soviet Union followed the new recruits as well, eating away from within at the organizations that received them like cancerous tumors. After all, the USSR's public institutions had squandered more of their energies on petty power struggles than on actually combating the encroaching shadow of capitalism. Those who hailed from the KGB often kept true to their natures even after switching masters, and, still thinking that the fastest road to success lay in ratting out their peers, took every opportunity they could to stab their allies in the back. Granted, the sinister and tenacious internal audits introduced recently by Hotel Moscow's burgeoning faction of former KGB *had* served to flush out those foolish, corrupt souls who dared to let their greed get the better of them. But to efficient individuals like Balalaika who preferred working on the front lines, all the audits represented were unnecessary headaches.

Tatiana Yakovleva, the auditor who'd been staying in Roanapur since last week, was also a Chekist - a former member of the KGB. There was little chance that Balalaika, who made no secret of her hatred for the Cheka, would look kindly on such a woman, but then to have that same woman intrude on her turf, snooping around like she owned the place and jeering openly at Balalika's authority... It was like having a snake crawling about in her bedding.

"But... she does have a point. The Nifrit's involvement in the attack on Chang is indeed cause for alarm."

"Mmm."

Balalaika nodded, accepting her right hand's opinion.

"Kapitan, wouldn't it be wise to contact the Lagoon Company and tell them to be more discrete? We can't ignore the possibility that their search for clues will cause unsavory rumors to spread."

¹⁰ **Политрук** (political commissar), officers responsible for disseminating political ideology and overseeing loyalty to the government and the military.

"We don't need to worry about that when it comes to Dutch. Have you forgotten, Sergeant? He's the man who negotiated peace between us and the Triad. His worries about a resuming of hostilities aren't for show."

Balalaika peered at the picture Dutch had brought as she spoke, recalling what he'd told her.

Using a stolen ship as an escape vehicle was nothing out of the ordinary. But it bothered her that said ship had just happened to be one that belonged to Bougainvillea Trading. There were plenty of ships docked in the harbor that would have been easier to take.

Perhaps it had been a calculated decision, an attempt to cover up the attack on Chang as the Russian mafia attempting to settle an old grudge. In that case, Balalaika couldn't afford to treat it like someone else's business.

"...Unless it's *not just an attempt* to make it look like we did it..." Balalaika muttered, her face twisting as though the dire words left an unpleasant taste in her mouth. Realizing the meaning behind them, the sergeant's fearsome features showed uncustomary anxiety.

"To cover almost an entire oil tanker with a Dragunov, at night, through a sidewind strong enough to make paragliding off a boat mast possible... Sergeant, how would a member of the Vysotniki go about such a mission?"

"If there was no other option, I would do everything in my power to make sure the mission succeeded."

Boris's textbook answer had a twofold meaning.

For the former Spetsnaz under Balalaika's command, such a task was far from impossible. However, before undertaking such an assignment, they would study the situation for an easier way to go about it. And if there was such a way, they would choose it without hesitation. Such was the difficulty of the stated operation.

They knew everything there was to know about rifles and parachutes, and that was how they could accurately assess the skills of the sniper who'd been on the Zaltzman that night.

"From what Dutch told us, there were plenty of other ways that an individual so skilled could have chosen to assault the tanker. But the sniper deliberately chose to take a spot on the mast. In other words... to him, the task wasn't so difficult as to require searching for alternatives."

Balalaika's eyes focused on something that wasn't there, wasn't then, but instead someplace far away in the distant past. Boris swallowed hard, his throat suddenly parched and dry.

"Kapitan..."

"You can think of someone like that, can't you, Sergeant? There was a genius, once, who could understand the harshest winds and turn them into his closest ally. He was Russian; he was Spetsnaz; he was one of us."

The same image came to the forefront of their minds. A land of boulders and sand, bereft of anything but dry winds and burning sunlight, a place that, simply by existing, refused all life.

His voice cracked and dry like the land in their minds, Boris finally found it in himself to name one man.

"Junior Sergeant Stanislav Kandinsky... But he's been dead for years..."

"Indeed. It's true that his name is one that should be decorating a gravestone and not coming from our lips. But..."

Balalaika's voice as she remembered, as she recalled that faraway land of death, was somehow like a prayer for the dead.

"...But can't the same be said for the rest of us as well, Sergeant?"

Stan's team had hidden themselves in Roanapur, just as Chang Wai-San had predicted... though perhaps "hidden" wasn't quite the right word for it.

In the corner of the lobby in one of the city's finest hotels, the Sankan Palace Hotel - granted, "finest" still didn't amount to much in a port town on the outskirts of Thailand - four men were seated in the sparsely populated dining bar. They were the four members of the assault team who'd made it off the Zaltzman with their lives.

There had been a few guests who'd come down to have breakfast up until just a while ago, but now it was past time that any rightfully employed person would have left to work, and the suspicious gathering of men sitting at the table, doing nothing, drew the eye more than it should have.

The only other people in the room were three beautiful women, most likely pricey prostitutes, who seemed to be enjoying a few drinks after a hard night's work. There were also two men who looked to be their bodyguards sitting at the next table, but both seemed disinclined to pay much attention to Stan's team, who were seated halfway across the room.

In actuality, Stan and Jake had been staying at the hotel in Roanapur before the specifics of the assassination had even been laid out. There had been no plans to attack a tanker on the open sea back then, and only once the mission was decided had the two traveled to Bangka Island, to meet up with Caroline's crew and the Lagoon Company.

The two pirates who had chosen to follow Jake after Caroline's death, Pedro and Alonzo, had done away with their comical costumes and now looked somewhat like civilized men, dressed in clothes they'd bought in the hotel's clothing store. The dangerous air of a hardened criminal hovered about Alonzo, marking him unmistakably as an outlaw. But Pedro, now clean-shaven and sporting a pair of shades, seemed almost delicate and intellectual; one could even be forgiven for mistaking him for a tourist.

"...Hey, how long is that redhead gonna make us wait?" Alonzo asked. He'd been shaking his leg nervously ever since they'd walked in, providing an annoying distraction. But it was more than understandable. After all, they were loitering out in the open the very day after they'd attempted a hit on the leader of one of the city's most powerful organizations.

Pedro was silent, as though he'd half given up already, Stan's drugged-up gaze still wandered aimlessly over the room, and Jake seemed completely absorbed by whatever he was typing into his laptop, a set of headphones blaring loud music into his ears.

"Didn't she say she'd come get us by car by 10 at the latest? You think there's been some kinda problem? Huh?"

"Beats me, man... Maybe she's try'na get a car that ain't gonna get traced or something, maybe..." Jake muttered absently.

Having failed his mission, Jake didn't want to tarry in such a noticeable position, either. In fact, he had already prepared a hideout in case something like this happened. The only problem was, it was a bit hard to reach on foot, so they'd decided to wait until the redheaded woman who'd saved them with the timely arrival of the cruiser last night came with a car to meet them.

But the promised time had come and gone, and Alonzo and Pedro, who hadn't been filled in on the exact details of the operation, were unable to keep their anxiety at bay.

"...What're you doing with that thing, anyway?" Pedro asked Jake, breaking his long silence as he watched the other man tap away at the keys.

"Eh? Ah, well... I guess you could call it my life's work, bro. Done for fun and profit, know what I mean? An' I'm just about, done, with this post..."

Perhaps deciding to wrap things up for the moment, Jake connected his cellphone to the laptop with a cable, transferring files over to the computer.

"Phew. Guess I'll have to post some more updates at night... Hmm. Man, you're right. The car really ain't showin' up."

Pedro and Alonzo stared at Jake, taking in his utter calm. They knew that Stan was the team leader, but seeing as how he was nearly always drugged to the gills unless they were in a

combat situation, they had jointly decided that Jake was the actual mover and shaker of their team.

But Jake, though his ruthlessness in a fight and his skills with a gun certainly made him nothing to laugh at, was also far from what anyone would call professional, and his ever flippant, teasing attitude made it hard for them to trust him, as well. They'd somehow ended up coming this far, but inside, both Pedro and Alonzo were furiously calculating just how long they were willing to stay on this particular bandwagon.

"...Разрешите обратиться (Excuse me, may I have a moment)?"

Everyone at the table tensed at the sudden voice approaching them - surprisingly for the other three, Stan had reacted the fastest. They hadn't expected a simple voice to snap him out of his drug-induced stupor.

The owner of the hesitant voice was one of the two men who'd been sitting with the whores on the other side of the diner. Seen up close, their broad shoulders and the hard set of their jaws made it even more obvious that they were bodyguards. For some reason, they'd decided to walk over to the table and now stood staring at Stan with decidedly disconcerted looks on their faces.

Jake, Pedro and Alonzo didn't even know what the language had been. Only Stan immediately recognized it as Russian.

Seeing Stan's reaction, the two men smiled broadly... though those joyous expressions were clouded with confusion as well.

The ensuing torrent of Russian pushed Jake and the other two completely out of the conversation.

"Junior Sergeant? Junior Sergeant Kandinsky, is that you? Do you remember us? I'm Kosloff. I served with you in Jalalabad. I was in the 11th task force."

"I'm David. Don't you remember me, Junior Sergeant?"

"Ah..... no....."

Stan remembered. He remembered the familiar sound of spoken Russian, the faces of the comrades with whom he'd gone through thick and thin. But he couldn't understand was why they were here, in a backwater city in Thailand.

Kosloff and David *were* glad to see their comrade-in-arms, but they were unable to hide their dismay at their former superior's pitiful transformation. They had approached him because

they remembered the Stanislav of back then, but now they were surely regretting their decision in the face of this gaunt shade of a man.

"Ah, I can't believe it... Junior Sergeant, we thought you were dead...! What brings you to Roanapur? Are these people your friends?"

"...And what has brought *you* here?"

Kosloff and David exchanged a meaningful glance at Stan's pointed question, nodded together, and answered.

"Actually, we've set up a trading company here with many other ex-Spetsnaz comrades. And can you guess who our boss is? It's Kapitan Pavlovena. Surprising, isn't it?"

Sofiya Pavlovena...

The moment the name reached his ears, Stan's face contorted even more, a rictus of astonishment and troubled confusion.

"Uh... Junior Sergeant?"

Perhaps to hide the turmoil inside him, Stan lowered his pale face as though embarrassed.

"...No, you've got the wrong person. I don't know anyone who goes by that name."

"What? What are you talking abo-" Kosloff began, but Stan cut him off with an upraised hand, turned up as though in supplication.

"I... I'm sorry. I must have said something to mislead you... It doesn't matter. Please, go away."

"..."

Kosloff and David stared at each other once more, this time in consternation at Stan's sudden change in behavior. And just then, from behind them, came the voices of the whores they'd been looking after.

"Hey, how long are you boys going to be chatting there, anyway? We want to go home, so get the car ready!"

The two men hadn't been in the dining bar on personal business. They were very concerned about their comrade's discomforting behavior, but their top priority at the moment was to ensure the safe return of the women.

"...If something happens, please contact us here," David said, his voice tinged with worry as he drew a business card from within his suit.

"Junior Sergeant... Even now, we would never leave a comrade in trouble. If you feel the need, we will not hesitate to be your strength. May we meet again."

So said, the two men left, glancing regretfully over their shoulders as they walked away.

"...The hell were they, Stan? You know them or somethin'?"

Jake, who had been left bewildered by the conversation held in Russian, picked up the business card that had been left on the table and eyed it suspiciously.

"Lessee here... Huh. Bougainvillea Trading, eh? Ho lee shit."

"...Do you know them?" asked Stan, still unable to completely hide his surprise at the unexpected reunion.

"Yeah, I did my homework before I came over here... This is a cover for the Russian mafia. I hear they're real badass motherfuckers. You got some scary friends, bro."

"Mafia, you say?"

Instead of calming him down, Jake's answer only served to further Stan's distress.

"Yeah. They say the leader, Balalaika, is the cruelest, most hardcore bitch in town. They call her Fry Face sometimes... Hey, what's with the weird face?"

"It, it's nothing..."

Stan tried his hardest to portray an image of calm, but it was obvious he was deeply shaken.

"Didn't you see those hookers just now? Why would guys working for a trading company be lookin' after girls like that, huh?"

"..."

Disbelief still stamped on his face, Stan could only stare at the hotel hallway where his old comrades had disappeared.

"It can't be... Kapitan? But... but, no... why?"

Late in the afternoon, the heat came together with the humidity to form a steam pot. Inside the Lagoon's engine room, where no breath of air conditioned wind had ever blown, Benny slaved away at the ship's machinery, his clothes and skin covered with sweat and oil.

He didn't really believe in the concept of work ethic, and he wasn't masochistic either. The only reason he'd decided to forsake the blessedly cool indoors to come and work in a hellish environment like this was because he found himself assailed by the maddening feeling of having his life hanging by a thread, with nothing he could do about it.

The members of the Lagoon Company had been charged with finding the team that'd assaulted the Zaltzman, and the Triad lurked in the shadows, waiting to mete out a grisly end should they fail. Dutch, Revy and Rock had set forth as soon as the ship docked to find information. Dutch, the ideal combination of brain and brawn, would have no problem looking for clues on foot, and though Revy had probably never heard of the word "negotiate," she had Rock to do the talking for her. Since Rock's conversational skills and other talents were excellent but he often lacked the nerve to make good use of them, and Revy's talents lay in intimidation, they made an unexpectedly good team.

The point was, that once all was said and done... Benny found himself alone, with nowhere to go.

In Benny's opinion, it was madness to go out and face Roanapur's citizens, who were serious contenders for the title of "world's most unhinged people." Far better, he thought, to work with machines. Even the most delicate gear or spring would always act as expected, as long as one was careful to follow the right steps when dealing with it. His companions knew him well, of course, which was why it had been decided that Benny would stay behind to repair the Lagoon while they went out and took care of the human aspect.

He'd finished the major repairs and replacements in the morning; the stuff he had left wasn't that pressing. Still, though it would have been nice to take a little rest during the infernal afternoon... Benny wasn't so shameless as to slump in front of the computer with a cold beer and surf the web while the others ran their asses off outside.

"Heeey, Benny! You in there?"

Revy's voice drifted down from the deck; it seemed she'd returned while he was busy. Benny turned his attention away from the nuts and bolts before him.

"Yeah, I'm in the engine room. What's up?"

"Lunchtime. Dutch says to meet up at Khao Han."

So it's already time for lunch, huh... Benny checked his wristwatch as he mopped the sweat from his brow, and only then realized how hungry he was.

He'd be able to ask the others about how their investigation had gone. He wondered if he should dare get his hopes up.

Gathering up his tools and rising to exit the room, Benny was suddenly struck by an odd feeling and turned to peer back at the machines behind him.

"..."

He couldn't say why, but for some reason... All day, he'd been assailed intermittently by a strange feeling while he made his repairs, and now that feeling made itself known once again. Of course, there was nothing amiss in the room. He could vouch for that, having had to work in it for over an hour straight.

"Benny? Yo, something wrong down there?"

"Huh? Oh... Sorry, I'll be right out."

He must have been more stressed than he'd realized. Benny nodded, trying to convince himself, and headed up to join Revy and the others.

Just a few minutes after Benny left...

A black silhouette, shaped vaguely like a man, slowly gained form inside the silent, deserted engine room.

Verily, it seemed as though one of the room's many shadows had suddenly acquired mass and form, coalescing into the shape of a human being. This figure had been hiding in the shadows just a few scant meters away from Benny while he worked, and yet he had avoided detection.

The matte black Japanese style clothes looked wildly out of place on the man, whose hulking form seemed to be made purely of hard, trained muscle. He was the ninja who should by all rights have been torn to shreds by Dutch's grenades.

It went without saying that there were no objects in the engine room big enough for such a man to hide behind. In fact, Benny had caught sight of him countless times. But he had, through harsh, intense training, unlocked the secrets of *ongyou no jutsu*¹¹, allowing him to become one with the great flow of ki running through the universe, erasing his presence from all perception. Those untrained in the ninja arts would be unable to detect him even if they did glance at him... No, even if they were to *stare directly* at him for prolonged periods of time, the poor foolish souls would be unable to register the shape as something meaningful.

¹¹ 隠形の術. Ninja art of moving/hiding unseen in the shadows.

The crew of this ship surely believed that they had killed him with explosives last night. But the thing that flew into the sea back then had been a Dutch Wife weighted down with barbells and fake blood packets, wrapped in black cloth. He had only needed to conceal himself behind the torpedo tubes and then throw out the doll at the proper timing, to make it look like he had jumped himself.

Such was the cunning secret of the ninja art, *utsusemi no jutsu*¹². Having heard from Stan that he might be required to stay behind and prevent the Lagoon from pursuing the rest of the team, he had decided to fake his own death after finishing his mission by pretending to jump into the sea. In fact, he had prepared the doll that would stand in for him well in advance, hiding it behind the torpedo tubes immediately after he made his way back to the Lagoon using his *suiton no jutsu*¹³.

He had gone to such lengths, knowing that the Black Lagoon would be his true escape route. He had been planning to smuggle himself on board until they docked at a port, and then disappear into the shadows when the opportunity presented itself.

But from what he overheard the crew members discussing, it seemed that Stan's team had ultimately failed in assassinating Chang Wai-San. What was more, the Lagoon itself had been charged with ferrying Chang back to Roanapur. Even he, with all his training in the myriad arts of the Orient, had been unable to foresee such an event. If he had known, he would have been able to prepare deadly traps in advance. But alas, as it was, he had been unable to strike even when he felt Chang's presence close by, forced to wait and bide his time.

Even had he attempted a suicide attack, the chances of him successfully taking Chang's life were slim. He had been able to sense the presence of those gathered on the bridge, and realized that they were all extremely skilled.

But that didn't mean the battle was lost.

The boat had docked in Roanapur. He, like Jake and Stan, had been hired from the beginning to assassinate Chang, and so he had already been briefed about the fall-back plan should the first assassination fail, and about the hideout that had been prepared for them to regroup at as well. He carefully spread forth his senses, and, detecting that there was nobody on the dock outside, transformed into a formless shadow that slid noiselessly out of the engine room.

And lo, so was the last descendant of all the Orient's darkness and wonder set loose upon the city of Roanapur.

¹²空蟬の術. Ninja art of replacing oneself with a dummy, allowing one to survive otherwise fatal attacks unharmed.

¹³水遁の術. Ninja art of moving swiftly and silently through water, as though one were walking on land.

Chapter 3

To the casual observer, Rehe Pictures, Inc. (熱河電影公司) was just an ordinary cable TV provider based in Roanapur. It sometimes filmed joint projects with other companies, but all of the actual work was done at the Bangkok branch, leaving the actual headquarters' unimpressive lobby void of any famous movie stars.

...Which was only natural, since the company was actually only a cover for the Thai branch of the Triad, the Chinese organized crime ring that spanned the entire globe.

So it only stood to reason that the man seated in the CEO's office was none other than Chang Wai-San. Though he was known to all and sundry as one of the most striking and stylish men in the city, for some reason he shied away from managing the organization's activities in the movie sector, instead leaving the specifics in that area to his underlings. Word on the street was that he was wary of the movie scene because he'd been mistaken for a famous movie star and started a huge commotion when he visited the organization's Bangkok headquarters, but nobody knew for certain.

By the time Chang, who was already somewhat tired due to taking care of the ruckus on the Zaltzman in addition to his normal duties, found himself faced with yet another item of work to do, the sun had already set and neon lights were beginning to cover the city with their flamboyant glare.

"...An informant, you say?" Chang asked doubtfully. His faithful right hand, Biu Yu Yun, only nodded.

"He says he knows where the men who tried to kill you are hiding, Da Ge¹⁴. He's just a beggar who makes his living on Charkuwan Street, but his story makes sense. There's a good chance he's telling the truth."

"Hmm... Just what are those Lagoon fellows doing out there, anyway?"

An information lockdown had been put into effect within the Triad regarding the attack on the Zaltzman. That meant that for a spy to have come to them with information, there had to be a rumor on the street already about the assassination attempt.

There was the possibility that the Lagoon Company's members had let something slip about the assassination attempt during their search. And if it were to become known that the Triad was involved in this event in any way, it was only natural that anyone with information would find it in their best interests to sell to whoever was willing to pay the most.

¹⁴大哥. Literally "big brother." A catchall term in the Triad for anyone above oneself in the organization hierarchy.

If this spy was telling the truth, the Lagoon Company's efforts would all be for naught. Chang's surprise was understandable.

"What will you do, Da Ge? Our boys are already ready, if you want them to move in."

"I don't know. What shall we do?"

Leaning back in his leather chair, Chang sighed and stared up at the ceiling. He'd been hoping to leave the whole thing to Dutch and his crew, for the sake of their future relations if nothing else. But if the Lagoon Company kept showing such dismal results, he'd have no choice but to rethink the matter.

Chang spent many long minutes turning the matter over in his head, and then, having arrived at a conclusion, stuck out his right hand. Biu placed a cellphone in it as though he'd been waiting for nothing else. First, Chang placed two calls to some trusted employees, and finally dialed the Lagoon Company's number.

"...Ah! That's right!" Rock suddenly cried. The crew was in their office, gathered around a delivered pizza and having what passed for dinner.

Dutch and Revy glared daggers at him, their nerves already set on edge from an entire day of fruitless searching.

"The hell is it?"

"I just remembered this. Do you think it might be a clue?"

Rock drew a small piece of paper from his shirt pocket. It was Jake's business card, the one that he'd tried to pass Revy during the commotion in the hold. Even Rock had forgotten all about it after shoving it in his pocket.

It couldn't really be called a business card, though. The only thing on the card's front were the words "Ultimate Cool J," written in ridiculously decorative font, with no address or phone number to speak of.

Revy only gave it a cursory glance before snorting and looking away, perhaps remembering something she'd rather have not.

"...Ya dumb fuck. How the hell is that a clue?"

"Look at the other side. Isn't this a web address?"

Benny pushed his way forward to take a look, as though sensing his turn had come.

"Hey, you're right. I don't know whether it'll help us or not, but there's no harm taking a look."

"Fuckin' fuck, like hell it'll help. Fuckin' site's probably some kinda porn site filled with viruses."

"Maybe. But I think it'd probably be more fun than sitting here eating shitty pizza."

Dutch, who'd been scowling as he chewed away at cold margerita pizza, got to his feet and walked over to the computer.

"Benny Boy, I'd wager it's worth giving a try. Let's see what we have."

"Okay."

Benny opened up a web browser on his beloved PC. Behind him, Dutch, Rock and Revy all peered over his shoulder with various degrees of expectation on their faces.

Soon enough, a gaudy logo showed up on the front page.

—Deadly Biz—

A seesaw game of life and death played on a razor's edge.

That's the Ultimate Cool style.

"Ah... er... well... I guess you could say... um... his style's very unique?"

Rock smiled awkwardly, as Japanese were wont to do when faced with something wildly outside their comfort zone.

Below the logo, there was a photo of the gun that Jake had shown to Revy so proudly in the Lagoon's hold, the automatic pistol that was so heavily modified it was impossible to tell what the model had originally been. There could be no other gun like it in the entire world. It was certain that this blog was run by Jake himself.

"What is this... some kinda commercial? Is he running some kind of internet business?" Dutch asked, taken aback, but Benny only shook his head.

"Nah, this isn't anything like that. This is... a journal. He's running an online journal."

As Benny scrolled downward, they saw dated entries appearing one by one.

-Sep. XX.

Wisconsin. I close in for the killing blow. The only light on the deserted highway, the cold, cold rays of the moon. The sky's spotlight shines on this showdown just for two. In other words, the main event, the battle between me, UCJ, and Willows "Junkman" Ganash. Far as I know, you can count the number of professionals in the midwest on Ganash's level on one hand. We've all been waiting for this, yeah. This promenade of two men, played with gunpowder and gunshots..."

"...Jesus H. Christ, this fucker's crazy," Revy muttered, her disgust passing some invisible threshold and transcending into a sort of reverent wonder.

If one were only to read the text, the journal entry could easily have been dismissed as a made-up story. But the image that had been uploaded along with it made that impossible.

It was a picture of a corpse. Not of a dead body lying on the ground. It was of a man, the very moment when the bullet struck home.

From the blur and the low resolution, it was clear that the image was a screenshot from a video file, not the work of a skilled cameraman. But the rough resolution actually served to make the scene seem more real, the spray of blood exploding from the man's back coming to life amidst the gritty pixels.

Though his way with words wasn't even worth the effort to ridicule, even Revy could understand the allure held by this one picture.

For those with certain tastes, this image represented something even more enticing than expensive caviar.

"...How in the world did he take this picture?" Rock murmured aloud, repulsion clear on his face. Revy opened her mouth to make fun of him, but closed it as she realized something important. Rock had adjusted a lot to the chaotic mess he'd found himself in, and the simple sight of a corpse could no longer shake him as it once would have. But he would have never have seen a corpse from this particular angle. To Revy it was a familiar sight, but for Rock it was surely an utterly alien perspective.

"Rock, this is the barrel's point of view."

"The barrel...?"

"Think about that fucker's gun. Y'know, the one that was just up there. There was something weird on the frame, wasn't there? I thought it was a laser pointer, but I think it musta been a camera."

"Ah, I see."

Rock looked down, embarrassed at his own ignorance. It was a simple enough answer when he thought about it, even though he'd never shot anyone before.

"...But wait. He posts these sick, masturbatory stories to the whole world whenever he does a job? He must be insane. Why doesn't he save the cops the trouble and turn himself in?"

"Because he won't get caught. This site looks like it's full of dangerously revealing information, but if you look closely, there's nothing that really helps you find out who Jake is, at all. It's the anonymity of the internet at work," Benny explained, pointing at the chrome plated pistol at the top of the page.

"The only clue to Ultimate Cool J's identity is this customized gun. There's not a single image on this site with his face in it. Even these journal entries are written all about 'who died where', but with not a single clue on who actually did the killing."

"...I get it. As long as Jake didn't parade around with his custom gun on display, nobody would know that he was this site's owner," Dutch said, nodding.

"No matter what kind of crazy shit he posts about here, everyone's hate would be focused on some imaginary man named J... But wait, that doesn't make any sense. Why did he show Revy his gun, then? And he gave her a card with his site on it, too. It's like admitting who he is outright. What was he thinking?"

"Maybe he thought it didn't matter if a bunch of people from some backwater city in Taiwan knew of him? Or maybe he's expecting something from Revy seeing this site."

"Fuck off, that ain't funny," Revy spat, looking genuinely disturbed by Benny's suggestion.

"Bah... Does this dipshit really get his rocks off on doing this? Why would he work so hard on something that nobody's gonna read, anyway?"

"...No, Jake might be a narcissist, but I don't think that's all... Look right here. And here, too."

Rock pointed at several places in the entries.

-It's all over... for him. What I had that he didn't? This awesome muzzle break. Gunsmith Tracy's special compensator once again seduced Lady Luck onto my side. If you want to control a .45 ACP's awe-inspiring recoil too, click [here](#).

-The punks thought they finished me off, but I got the last laugh. An ultimately cool guy like me knows that it's better safe than sorry. My cutting edge kevlar shirt blocked their 9mm

parabellum bullets, letting me rise from the ashes like a phoenix. For more information, click [here](#). It'll be the best decision you ever make.

-It's finally time for the biz to start in New Orleans. Canada's winters are really cold. In a freezing environment like this, you have to be careful about what kind of gun oil you pick, too. That's why I use Lev Mikey's special high quality oil. Even if it's so cold you can use bananas as nails, if you got this by your side, you're A-OK. Click [here](#) now!

Clicking on the links one by one, Benny discovered that they all led to internet shopping sites specializing in guns and other firearm-related items.

"...Aha, he must have made a deal with these businesses. Maybe he gets advertising commissions?"

"Advertising? The fuck? Telecom World'd do a better job selling stuff than this shit."

"Are you sure? If this counter's telling the truth, this place gets a lot of hits... Let's see what's on the BBS."

Benny clicked the link that led to the visitor's guestbook.

**>robin666: I tried the adjustable rearsight J recommended on my colt. fuckign cool!
ultimately cool! every1 on the shooting range was looking at me! he's a real pro!!!
>Car-Morgan: UCJ's the best. I'd love to sleep with him.
>Savage-X: The latest Murder Review was fucking awesome. Who's awesome? You're awesome, Ultimate Cool J. Next time, kill XXX and XxxX!
>spookydog: lets fight ucj ill b waiting 4 u at teh bank of ameriac parking lot 2nite lets see who the real ultimit cool is
>IIIOWOIII: Please, J, kill my homeroom teacher Miss Garroway! The whole class is willing to chip in for your pay. Send me an email, okay?
>xXsteelCommanderXx: Typical Americans and your blind magnum worship. Speed counts for more than mass in terms of kinetic energy, so if you're talking about actual power there's not much difference between a .45 and a 9mm parabellum. Isn't it the obvious choice for a pro to pick the 9mm then, since you can fire more bullets before having to reload?
>MADMAX: Hey fuck off nazi. the nazis made 9mm so anyone who uses 9mm is a nazi get it? now gtfo**

"...Hey, Benny. Is the whole internet full of retards like this, or is this place just somethin' special?"

"Well, depending on how you look at it, I guess you could make a case for the former."

Revy turned slightly pale at the unexpected display of stupidity, but Benny, who was used to such idiocy, looked more bored than anything.

"Well, I guess now we know how Jake's mind works now, but I don't think there's anything here that'd help us find... huh?"

Benny stopped his absentminded refreshing of the page and leaned forward, adjusting his glasses.

"There's been an update... Another journal entry, maybe?"

It was dated today.

The new image gracing the front page was a picture, not of a cadaver, but a hugely magnified picture of someone taking part in a gunfight, the quality of the image almost laughable.

That someone was a woman wearing a tank top and denim hotpants, a very familiar tribal tattoo featured prominently on her right arm. But at the same time it seemed unfamiliar, as though someone had edited the image before posting it.

The woman's breasts looked about twice as large as they'd expected, and even though she was in the middle of a ferocious firefight, her eyes had been retouched to be seductively half-lidded instead of glaring at the camera.

-Hello. Our special this time comes to you from the seas of southeast Asia. Today I want to tell you about this cute kitty cat who I, the illustrious UCJ, happened to meet.

We'll call this hot babe here, who uses a pair of custom Beretta handguns, Two Hand R. She's a seductress who charms men into her bed with her exotic body and then kills them when she's done, a real shameless whore. She also happens to be my target.

At first I thought I'd enjoy a little romantic cruise while pretending to be on her side, but the desire in her eyes was so hot I thought it might even melt yours truly, ultimately cool though I may be. This kitty's got to be starved for a little sweet loving. See those tits? No bra for those babies, boys and girls. Watching them bounce, what can I say? They should've sent a poet. Way I see it, there's no way she's not hungry for some man, the way she acts.

But it turns out she can't feel a thing down under, short of a monster dildo or two. I can understand why she uses two guns, if you know what I'm saying. It must get pretty frustrating, all that need and no way to satisfy it.

So that's why I made my decision. I'm gonna fuck her, in the most ultimately cool way imaginable. I'll tap that ass so hard she won't be able to walk for weeks.

Now won't you all stay up with me and help think up ways to make her scream? If you have a good idea, leave a message on the guestbook. I'll be waiting!

Dutch, Rock and Benny all found themselves at a sudden loss for words. They were, at that moment, linked by a sort of shared psychic experience. Perhaps a technician standing next to an active nuclear reactor would have some inkling of the feeling enveloping them at that moment. The wordless terror brought about by being bathed in invisible, intangible radiation. Through their very skin they could feel the awesome power and fury being generated at their sides.

"...Benny boy. Close the browser," Dutch said, forcing the words from his parched throat. Benny hastily moved to comply, but in his hurry his index finger came down on the left mouse button as he moved. As luck would have it, it was just when the cursor was moving over the guestbook.

Only a few minutes had passed since their last visit, but already a slew of new posts had filled the screen.

>BunkerBuster: Holy shit Two Hand R! Damn, what a cutie!
>smokemoneter: Look at those tits, man. I bet that tattoo on her shoulder goes over her tits and all the way down to her pussy. My cock knows it's true.
>funfun85: i wanna see you skullfuck her dude. who cares if she dies?
>masamichi: nude shoop up on the uploader
>sleipnir: FUCK YEAH MASAMICHI
>Savage-X: My body is ready
>DX_Synner: Please UCJ for the love of god, give us a movie of you fucking her up the ass with the UC Custom stuck in her cunt. I'll cum all over my screen.
>MassiveBOY: Something's wrong with R's boobs. You sure it's not a trap?
>Jason13: a trap is fine too

Benny's monitor was a 20 inch EIZO display that was his pride and joy. It was a pricey piece of equipment to be sure, an investment on the Lagoon Company's part that served as the centerpiece of the office. Unfortunately, however, it had not been made to withstand a 9mm bullet fired straight at it.

Even more unfortunately for everyone involved, Revy had been at that very instant seized by the sudden and immediate urge to kill Jake and all of his fans, and—since they were nowhere to be found—she found herself with no choice but to express her displeasure with the universe at large upon the machine which had shown her such unsavory words.

The only silver lining to this cloud was that no shards of glass from the grisly monitor massacre flew outward and hit anyone. Another stroke of good luck was that Revy didn't feel compelled to fire two or three more rounds for good measure.

"Motherfuckin'... Yeah, alright, I gotcha, cockstain... You wanna die that badly, do ya? Need an express ticket straight to Hell, y'say? Yeah, gotcha, I'll ring one right the fuck up..."

Revy suddenly began chuckling darkly to herself, as though her rage had produced a strange kind of narcotic inside her brain.

Just at that moment, when nobody could quite figure out how to defuse the situation and make it out with all bodily parts still intact and attached to their original places, the phone rang. Its shrill tones sounded to the three men like a chorus of angels from on high. And verily, the call was indeed something very much like the gospel—it was Chang Wai-San himself, calling to tell them that Jake's hideout had been found.

Stand carefully studied the veins of his left arm. He needed to shoot up.

Countless needle holes already pockmarked the skin of his arm, drawing out a complicated road map that illustrated the depths of Stan's addiction.

"Hey, bro... Didn't ya just take a hit a second ago?" Jake said from the side, smirking humorlessly. It spoke volumes about how far gone Stan was, for a man like Jake to express his concern. He must be in worse shape than he'd thought.

But it didn't matter. All he needed to do was avoid seeing his own reflection. This was no time to be worried about how bad a state he was in. All he needed at that moment was the comfort that only heroin could provide.

He stabbed with the needle, depleted the plunger. Immediately, he felt the Reaper's sweet caress flowing through his veins. He could have traded the world for this pleasure. Stan's consciousness melted away the constraints of time and causality, falling deep into a maze of memory.

They beat him. They cut him. They held glowing irons to his skin. Still, Stan felt no pain. But soon enough the Mujahideen¹⁵ interrogator realized that Stan was a heroin addict. That was when the real torture began.

¹⁵ Muslim freedom fighters, in this case specifically the ones who fought against the Soviets in the 1979-1989 Soviet war in Afghanistan.

Moaning in pain from the withdrawal symptoms, Stan told them everything in exchange for a just a single blissful shot. His name, his rank, the name of his unit, the places where he'd fought and who he'd killed there. That was when the guerrillas realized just who their prisoner was.

"Shaitane Badi..."

Their soft cries had contained not only hate, but also an unmistakable note of awe and reverence.

They gave him a stolen Dragunov. Told him to prove his skills. When he shot clean through a watermelon at 500 meters, the Mujahideen realized Stan's worth.

He wandered aimlessly. Not even the moon shone to illuminate the ebon night.

He might have been in Istanbul, or Varna, or maybe even Ankara.

He simply did what he was told, a dumb hunting hound. He killed, and in return he received heroin.

But his masters suddenly disappeared. Nobody showed up at the rendezvous point. Not even the emergency radio channel he'd been taught was of any use. Perhaps they had been destroyed before he was. It was well within the realm of possibility. The local police might have got them, or maybe a western intelligence agency, or perhaps they'd fallen victim to a Pashtun Taliban ambush. Stan had often been assigned to take out individuals belonging to such organizations, so it didn't seem all that strange that they'd decided to return the favor with interest.

That was how Stan came to find himself wandering alone in a strange land, with no home to return to and no companion at his side save the silent night.

Perhaps if he killed someone else, he might be given more heroin...

That was the sole thought running through Stan's head as he walked on, dreading the inevitable withdrawal symptoms that could strike at any moment.

The flow of time melted. The chains of causality faded away.

Stan carefully studied the veins of his left arm. He needed to shoot up.

The Hazara who'd given him the drugs glared at him before spitting at his feet.

"You killed my younger brother," the man said. The brother in question had been Mujahideen, one of the many who had fallen before the reaping gale of Shaitane Badi. That was back when the Mujahideen had still been fighting against the Soviets. Back when Stan had answered to "Sergeant," not "Dog."

"I'll never forgive what you did," the man said, hatred coloring his voice. "Pay back the debt you owe me with souls. Use the skills which felled so many of our brethren for our sake now."

The Afghani continued to fight. They kept fighting after the Soviets left, as they had been before the Soviets came. The enemies of Allah were, after all, without number.

Even those who worshiped the same god were enemies. The Hazara, the Pashtun, the Uzbek, the Tajik, all fought one another tooth and nail for control of the country. The adversaries standing in their way numbered as many as the desert sands, and their lives, too, were worth as little as those same grains of grit.

And so Stan fought on in that gritty hell long after his comrades had left. Every time he took out a target, he received heroin. It was the sole reason he lifted his Dragunov, day after day.

The flow of time melted. The chains of causality faded away.

He wandered aimlessly. He walked through choking black smoke, the stench of napalm hanging thick and cloying about him.

Some of the bodies around him were naught but blackened corpses. Others, even worse, were still alive. He knew that the small ones were the bodies of children. Perhaps the twisted masses surrounding them as though to shield them from the fire had been their mothers. He could see everything. He saw that not one of the bodies held a weapon in their hands.

He had been told that this place was a hideout for a splinter cell of antigovernment Mujahideen guerrillas who had set themselves against the Kamal administration. The information had come from a trusted source, so there had been no scouting, no confirmation. The infantry had been given the order to clean up once the bombers and artillery did their job.

"The guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea," Mao Zedong had said once. The Soviets, realizing they could not possibly catch all the fish, had taken to drying up the sea. Indiscriminate attacks on civilian villages were already becoming standard procedure. Soon, the province of Baghlan would become nothing but a deserted wasteland.

He felt no rage. He did not even feel it was unfair. If he let himself feel such emotions, he would be unable to accept reality. This was their mission. This was their war.

He had no choice but to accept... that in this place, a life was worth less than a grain of sand.

Stan carefully studied the veins of his left arm. He needed to shoot up.

He was surrounded by the desert, his own sense of self-worth fallen to less than a grain of sand. Whenever Stan came to his senses, he found himself searching for the comfort of heroin.

As long as he stayed at the camp, drugs were easier to come by than liquor. Afghanistan was a world famous producer of opium. The drugs came roundabout through the local rebels and into the hands of the Soviet army. And the profits came roundabout into the hands of the Mujahideen. But he couldn't even bring himself to care anymore. He needed the fleeting moment of ecstasy that only heroin could provide. Without it, he couldn't even lift his rifle anymore.

Why were the Soviets here in Afghanistan? The flimsy excuse that they were there to support the Kamal administration in Kabul no longer held any water. Rumors abounded, with some saying that they were using the stalemate as an opportunity to give soldiers real combat experience, and others whispering that the government's real objective was to test new experimental weapons. Only the Kremlin knew the truth.

Either way, all the Soviets had to do was destroy the roads connecting Afghanistan's cities, and take control of the airfields. Then they would proceed to burn all the farms, starving the guerrillas to death. Only a dry land of shifting sands would remain... yes. They were fighting here to return everything to dust.

But... now that he thought of it... Stan asked himself a question, sifting through his hazy memories.

He felt as though things hadn't always been this way. There had been a time when he had had a reason to fight, regardless of the situation, regardless of what the politicians said. Hadn't there been a bravado in his heart that feared no death, a will in his breast that urged him to charge ever forward?

Now, he couldn't even be certain that there had ever been such times. What had changed? Everything became obscured by the storm of sand, the smells buried beneath the stench of napalm and bubbling human fat, and everything once again hidden behind a veil of heroin. He remembered nothing.

He wandered aimlessly. The cold of the desert night seeped into his bones.

The barren land stretching infinitely in every direction, empty save the sound of blowing wind, somehow brought to mind the depths of the ocean. It must have been the pale moon in the inky sky, looking like the sun might look from beneath the waves.

He had no food or water, and certainly no weapon. Empty-handed, he'd walked all the way from the base. When the sun rose, the merciless heat would surely burn him to death. That would be enough. He welcomed his own death with open arms.

There was a faster, more certain way to go about things. It involved putting the barrel of a Makarov to his head and pulling the trigger. But if he'd had the courage to do so, he probably wouldn't have become addicted to drugs in the first place. In other words, he was just trying to run away. He wanted to run and run, until he could run no more, and finally reach the land of death. The only method of suicide available to such a coward was "walking." He was attempting to walk himself to death. He was giving his life over to the arid desert because he didn't have what it took to end it himself.

But... even as he drifted through the hazy memory of that nocturnal journey, Stan once again asked himself...

What was he running from? Was he afraid that the weight of the lives he'd taken would crush him, grains of sand gathering and gathering to form an immense dune? No, the cure for that should have been heroin. Why was he looking for death now, when he'd buried his sadness and despair under a wave of drug-fueled fantasies? What was chasing him? What was he running from?

All he could think of was the memory of that one night, and the preposterous end that had come to that cold trek through the desert.

The price for his weakness had been great indeed. Some time after he collapsed, the strength gone from his limbs, Stan had regained consciousness... his hands and feet bound fast with chains.

A Mujahideen scouting party had found him unconscious in the desert. Fate had given Stan a life that was far more shameful and pathetic than death.

The flow of time melted. The chains of causality faded away.

The scream of bullets tearing through the air almost sounded like the laughter of Death itself.

The isolated forward base at Panjshir Valley provided a tantalizing target for the guerrillas. First they hung back, worrying the Soviet soldiers and forcing them into a constant state of heightened awareness, until finally the men were at their mental limit. That was when the guerrillas struck, bursting from the mountains to attack at full force. Stan had already experienced the cycle many times... but this was probably going to be his last.

The continuous attacks had already depleted the base's supply of able manpower, and even those capable of fighting were already wounded or suffering from acute exhaustion. And still, their enemies were like a swarm of locusts. No matter how many they killed, there was no end to the attackers. Old men and young boys, their voices raised together in the praise of God, charged over the bodies of their comrades and into the fire of the Deglachev machine guns without a backwards glance.

There was no way they could win. A thousand Kalishnikovs and a billion bullets would not have turned the tide. They would need enough bullets to fire at all the grains of sand in the desert to quell the voices singing Allah's praise. The Mujahideen came like a tidal wave. A sandstorm made of human lives. There could be no defeating it. All they could do was endure. Endure until they died, endure until there could be nothing else.

Stan's heroin-addled mind had long since done away with the concept of fear. Only empty apathy was left, a dry wind that blew through his heart. Yes, he thought. We are but grains of sand. It is our fate to be blown away in the face of this storm, piling up in this arid land. Buried and forgotten.

Vysotniki, someone muttered, the word simply a meaningless collection of sounds.

Still, there was a hopeless kind of hope in the man's voice, a foolish wish that had been too late in coming.

Vysotniki. It had once been something like a prayer, a holy word that brought salvation. Composed of the best of the best from the Soviet 318th rear distraction brigade's 11th squadron, the Vysotniki appeared wherever the voices of their allies were raised in pleas for help. Heedless of danger, they plunged into the deadliest killzones, the most desperate situations, to create paths to life where there had been none. They were, in a word, the last hope of the isolated and otherwise doomed Soviet soldiers.

...But the Vysotniki were just a legend, a note in the annals of history.

Stan knew this. He himself had been a member of the Vysotniki. He had once thrown himself fearlessly into countless hellish battlefields, and the name "Shaitane Badi" had made Afghani guerrillas tremble with fear. There had been a time, long ago, when he had felt the hot blood running through his veins as he fought to save one more comrade, one more life.

But the Vysotniki had been disbanded, spread to the four winds together with the pride they'd thought would last forever. Together with the belief in battle that had been their only belief. On that fated day in July of 1987... Stan should have died. Better to have died there than be swept away like a grain of sand here...

Suddenly, an earsplitting crash came from outside. A flash of blinding light. The roar of double Ysoft engines, powering a helicopter's five-bladed rotor, dominated the battlefield.

Two Hind gunships soared over the Mujahideen, spreading fire and death in their wake. They looped around and their rocket launchers spat fire, the 12.7mm minigun hanging below the cockpit playing a song of massacre.

With all guns blazing the Hinds meted out death to the Mujahideen. They hovered in place, and Stan could see guardian angels rappelling down from the hatches. Mensov, David, and even the fearsome sergeant, Boris... His comrades in arms, together with whom he'd fought through thick and thin. Stan honestly couldn't tell whether they were real, or simply the flashes of memory that one saw before death.

The Vysotniki, someone shouted. There was joy in that voice, but also fear. Fear at seeing these messiahs returned from the grave.

And that was when Stan saw her. The goddess of war stepped into the bunker. The valkyrie had come.

Her face, smeared with the soot and dirt of the battlefield and twisted with horrific scars, was surely a face fit for a demon who could waltz lightly through such Hell. The stench of blood hung about her like perfume. And yet, Stan could only tremble, completely captured by her beauty... Yes. There could be no other word to describe her. She was an avatar of steely will, a concept given flesh that threw away the bonds of despair and terror to charge forward. There was a piety about her that could only be seen on the battlefield, in the godless Hell where they found themselves, a holy quality that announced to all just how strong human beings could be. She was living proof of that strength.

"...It seems I've kept you waiting, comrade Junior Sergeant."

The cold but strong tones of her voice defied all of Stan's attempts at dismissing her as a hallucination. I am here, the voice said. I am now.

"Lieutenant Pavlovena..."

How are you here?

You have already fought more than enough. You were captured while protecting refugees, resisting torture that lasted a month and left you with burns over your entire body. Your fight

should be over. When I saw you beaten and battered after we rescued you, when I heard that you had been sent back home and the Vysotniki had been disbanded, I breathed a sigh of relief instead of a cry of dismay. I wanted to raise a toast to you, for you had finally found a way out of this hell. But why...

"Why... Why did you come back, Lieutenant?"

"Lieutenant Pavlovena was discharged. But Kapitan Pavlovena wasn't, comrade Junior Sergeant."

Sofiya Pavlovena smiled broadly, as though to say that a joke was the best reply for such a question. Then she turned to the forces gathered round her and gave her orders, her voice ringing boldly, just like it always had.

"All troops move out! Secure any surviving allies and hunt down any and all hostile remnants!"

...And so, the Vysotniki rose from the ashes, renewed once more. The hero had returned.

Sofiya Pavlovena had changed inside since she'd returned to Afghanistan as a captain. One could see that at a glance.

There was an emptiness in her calm, almost blank gaze, something that made it seem as though she'd forsaken something important to her. It seemed that there would never again be anything like hope or joy shining in those eyes.

"...Why did you return?" Stan asked again, after the battle was over. The evening wind blew against them as they stood watching the unit prepare to vacate the premises.

"I heard rumors that you'd been chosen for the Soviet firing team for the Seoul Olympics. But why..."

"Do you think that I could participate in a contest with my country's pride on the line with a right eye like this? Unfortunately, my eyesight on this side isn't half what it used to be.

With a smile far too bright to be called self-deprecating, Sofiya pointed at the burned right side of her face.

"The higher ups decided that I would be more at home in the hell of Afghanistan than wearing a medal in Seoul. And I agreed. I am... tired, I suppose you could say, of living my life according to their hypocritical whims."

Stan could feel in her dry and placid tones, from time to time, the heart of an old and tired animal that was looking for a place to die. A frightening premonition overtook Stan, and his face froze with anxiety.

But Sofiya smiled then, as though to belay Stan's misgivings. It was the same lively smile she'd worn a year ago.

"I've lost everything, but here, there is still something I can salvage.

"Kapitan..."

"Our retreat from Afghanistan is finally being put into action. Finally. There is no longer any reason for anyone to lose their life in this land. The war we waged in search of a victory which was never there is over. All we're fighting for now is the lives of our soldiers."

Unlike when she'd been talking of her own life, Sofiya's voice as she spoke of the battles to come was full of iron will and spirit.

"I don't need honor or glory anymore. One more soldier to bring home is enough for me. Perhaps now, I've finally found a meaningful battle to fight."

Standing beside her, Stan saw in her casual poise what it meant to be a hero.

Indeed, only battle could support her soul. Even after being burned alive, Kapitan Pavlovena had found her hunger for war unsated. Faced with her dire resolve and noble courage, Stan couldn't help but take a look at himself. In his heart, the heart that had once fallen deep into the depths of addiction and turned away from facing reality, the hero's words found their mark. The pain couldn't even be compared to that of a bullet wound. It burned far more fiercely. It was far harder to endure.

He was almost surprised. He hadn't thought that he could still feel the emotion known as shame.

Sofiya spoke to him then, uncanny sympathy coloring her voice.

"Junior Sergeant Stanislav, you have fought well. Go home now, and rest. It's still not too late."

Yes... She must have known in an instant. Stan's gaunt face and empty eyes were unmistakable, after all. They were the features of a drug addict.

Every thought he'd ever had came back to him as time melted away and memories lost cohesion.

Rage and pain. Pride and joy. Despair and shame... Everything he'd given away to heroin.

Back when he was called the Devil's Wind, Stanislav Kandinsky had once fought side by side with Sofiya Pavlovena. Not for an ideology, not for hatred. He had raised his weapon solely for the sake of his comrades who fought at his side. That was the entirety of his motive, without a smidgen of doubt. The cornerstone of his will to fight.

He had admired that nobility. That courage had illuminated his heart.

But he had tarnished those glorious days by his own actions.

What had he been doing during the year Sofiya was gone? He had killed old men too decrepit to bear arms, shot mothers trying to protect their children. Unable to bear the weight of his actions, he'd given himself over, body and soul, to white powder. Had he told himself that any human being would have done the same thing in the face of such harsh conditions? Had he really thought that was true? He knew of a woman who had been on Death's doorstep, a woman who had kept on fighting even when burns had covered her entire body. She was what it meant to be Spetsnaz. A model soldier, indomitable will emblazoned on her breast. And he... he was trash, worse than trash.

The day finally came for the Soviets soldiers to return home, and none of them was in any state to sing triumphant songs as they left. But still, their homeland would surely welcome them back with open arms, acknowledging the hardships they'd endured and the courage and pride they'd kept in their hearts. What else could the people of their homeland call the ones who had survived in such harsh conditions but heroes? How could they celebrate anything if they could not celebrate the return of such brave soldiers?

But despite that—no, because of that—Stan had no home to go back to. It would be an insult to such noble warriors for a loser like him to walk at their sides.

He had dismissed himself as a grain of sand. He had given up, resigned to a fate of being blown away by the wind. How could he return home as a hero after thinking such things?

So he ran away. Ashamed of himself, unable to look the heroes around him in the eye, believing that disappearing into the deserts of this foreign land was the only way to atone for his sins, he ran away.

But even then, unable to die as he'd wished, he kept on fighting and killing, a tool for the men who'd once been his enemies. His mind once again a grain of sand, wandering, looking for a vein, cycling endlessly through the memories that melted away before the influence of heroin...

...Even now, we would never leave a comrade in trouble...

A voice from his past. The concern and support of his comrades, who he'd thought lost to the depths of his memories.

The sound still lingered in his ears, echoing inside his head.

It couldn't be. There was no way they could be living in such a *wretched cesspool*. Such voices *should never have been heard here*, in the place where he'd ended up after turning his back on the proud life of a soldier.

...They say the leader, Balalaika, is the cruelest, most hardcore bitch in town. They call her Fry Face sometimes...

A woman with burn scars on her face. The memory of the phantom who had once burned brighter than any other inside his heart.

Such a thing could not be. Such a thing *must not be*.

The hero had surely returned to her motherland to be showered with praise. Surely, in Russia they sang songs in her honor even today.

Though he had fallen into the dirt, he'd believed that there was still a star shining in the heavens. That was the only thought that had given his tortured soul any reprieve.

That was why there could be no woman named "Balalaika." Such a woman could not exist in this world...

The flow of time melted. The chains of causality faded away.

Trapped in an unending nightmare, Stan could only continue murmuring denials to himself.

The Triad had found out where the Zaltzman assault team was hiding before the Lagoon Company, and now it was no exaggeration to say that the Lagoon's reputation was in shambles. But Chang, ever magnanimous, had given Dutch another chance.

He'd suggested that a team of freelancers infiltrate the hideout instead of having Triad members do the job—a team of freelancers that would, naturally, include a fighter from the Lagoon. The crew of the Lagoon, being in no position to refuse, had had no choice but to send Revy to join Chang's handpicked team.

And that was how Revy came to find herself jostled this way and that in the dingy back of a Jeep Cherokee, squashed in with five other people as they headed toward an abandoned factory just outside of Roanapur as per their informant's tip. She hadn't been told anything about who would be working with her... and now, thinking back on it, that was when she should have realized that something was up.

"Ooooooh... The minstrel boy to the war has gone! Ah hey hey! In the ranks of Deaaaaaaath ye will find him, his father's sword he hath girded oooooon! An' his wild harp sluuuuuung behiiiiind him!"

The Irishman behind the wheel was obviously doped to the gills on cocaine, barely keeping his grip on the steering wheel as he belted out a soulful traditional song. Somehow, he'd gotten *even worse* than the last time Revy's life had depended on his skills.

"If I'd known this crazy motherfucker was driving again, I'da grabbed a tuk-tuk instead..."

The beautiful woman sitting in the front passenger seat snorted at Revy, absently checking her makeup in the small compact mirror she had open.

"No worry. Leigarch high to moon tonight, but he never make driving mistake."

The glossy black hair that hung down to the small of her back and the silk cheongsam she wore, slit dangerously high on her thigh, might have led one to believe that the woman was a hostess at some expensive nightclub. But in reality, she was an infamous bounty hunter, feared even in the lawless madhouse of hired guns that was Roanapur.

"...Why the fuck're you all here anyway, huh?! C'mon, tell me, yes lady!"

"Mouth still dirty like sewer, bitch. Should have learned manners before learn English, yes?"

Though Leigarch's partner, Shenhua, was of Chinese descent just like Revy, she claimed to be *benshengren*¹⁶, and her English still needed some of work. Still, she was a first class killer, and her skills with the pair of *liuyedao* she wielded were without equal.

Rivy had fought alongside her just once—come to think of it, that time had been at Chang's request as well—and watched with her own eyes as Shenhua effortlessly filleted a group of men armed with guns without even giving them time to pull their triggers.

"Fine, I guess he coulda gotten you, but why the fuckin' Tango Brothers too?"

¹⁶本省人. Chinese who moved from China to Taiwan around the seventeenth century, as opposed to the *waishengren* (外省人), Chinese who moved to Taiwan with Chian Kai-shek after 1945.

Revy shot a glare at the third row of seats, and as though in reply the three Hispanic men sitting there side by side began to sing, their voices rising in a lively rhythm.

"♪Mister Chang called us so we go to kill.♪"

"To kill!"

"♪Riding along in a jeep.♪"

"A jeep!"

"...Okay. I get the message. Now shut the fuck up."

The three men humming blithely, seemingly unaware of the murderous atmosphere, formed the trio of killers known as the Albondigas Brothers. The brothers had made their way to Roanapur after realizing that their tango band was going nowhere, taking up professional killing along the way. They'd kept the habit of talking in staccato beat even after switching from singers to killers, though, making them into a deadly annoyance to their peers as well as their foes.

Revy snorted. "Meh, I can't believe Chang... He coulda just fuckin' *told* me where the fuckers are an' then I coulda gone an' finished the job myself," she muttered.

"That just mean he not believe in Lagoon crew. He want someone to keep eye on idiots who help tanker attack team."

"...The fuck you just say to me, cunt? You must be even dumber'n I thought if I heard you right. I musta misunderstood, right, yes lady?"

Revy shot Shenhua a poisonous glare, but she only returned it in kind, murder in her eyes.

"Only stupids believe bitch who lie about where papers are in Basilan. Never hear of boy who cry wolf?"

"...Jesus fuck, you're still on the rag about *that*? Lemme guess, you don't have much luck with the guys, do ya? They all run away for some reason, right?"

"I think that is none of your business, yes?"

The Albondigas Brothers continued joking amongst themselves, heedless of the murderous atmosphere building up like a storm cloud around the two women.

"♪One day the team began to fight amongst themselves.♪"

"Amongst themselves!"

"♪Fighting about things long past.♪"

"...Didn't I tell you cocksuckers to shut the *fuck* up?!"

Shenhua sighed, her desire to kill completely extinguished by the tango rhythm.

"Anyway, make sure to kill idiots who attack Chang Da Ge where I see you. No other way to believe you. You understand, yes?"

"Yeah, yeah, I getcha, yes," Revy said, raising her voice in a mocking parody of Shen Hua.

"Just don't hold me up... and, listen. You see some fucker who looks like a rapper or somethin', packin' a gun that looks like it's made outta plastic, he's mine. Kill him, and I'll kill you. Get in my way, same deal."

All of her arguing with Shenhua had done little to distract Revy from her current mission in life: killing Jake. Every moment spent squabbling in the jeep was a moment wasted. She wanted to fill that motherfucker with hot lead A S A fuckin' P.

"Oh? Look like there bad blood there, yes? Much fun. I think I will watch."

"♪A rift had formed in our team.♪"

"In our team!"

"♪But, soon that rift was mended.♪"

"I said, *shut the fuck up!*"

Completely unaware of the fighting going on behind him, Leigarch drove on, lost in a wonderland of Irish folk music.

"Thy songs were maaaaade, for the puuuure an' freeeeeeeeeeee! They shall never sound in slaaaaaaaaaaaaaavyyyyyy! Yeaaaaah!"

The truth about Roanapur and the things that happened inside its borders had never really been revealed to the outside world. The criminal organizations that held sway over the city had joined forces to keep the hive of villainy preserved forever, reducing the amount of information that escaped the city limits to the absolute minimum.

And so it came to be that sometimes, very rarely, a foreign company with too much ambition and too little common sense saw that the prices of land and labor in Roanapur were extremely cheap and, unaware that Roanapur might as well have been named Sodom, thought to set up shop within the city.

Naturally, almost all such foolish plans were brought to a swift end by the forces behind Roanapur, sometimes indirectly—through subtle threats and interference—and sometimes directly—through direct warnings. But from time to time, very rarely, when the company manager in question was very foolish indeed, plans for expansion continued until a building was raised.

There was nothing worth mentioning about the tragedies which inevitably followed. Either way, it was easy to find half-finished deserted buildings in and around Roanapur's city limits, buildings whose occupants had mysteriously disappeared mere days after construction began.

The hideaway that had been chosen for Jake's team was one such deserted factory. Surrounded by forest on all sides and difficult to reach on foot from the city limits, the factory presented a perfect hideout, safe from the unwanted attention of wandering vagrants and the homeless.

If the factory had been outside of cell phone range as well, Jake would never have agreed to settle there. But fortunately, the signal came through strong and clear, allowing Jake to continue his second life online.

Jake smiled, enjoying the reactions of his faithful readers on the guestbook of his blog, Deadly Biz. But that happiness proved to be a fleeting thing, for the transceiver at his side chose that moment to ring. It was Alonzo, who had been posted outside as a lookout.

"...What's up?"

"There's a car heading this way. This is bad... do you think someone was following us?"

Alonzo had shown a sharp reaction, but to Jake it seemed far too early to worry about being found. They'd just arrived that afternoon, and hadn't even left the grounds after arriving.

"No way, bro. Probably a pair of sweethearts come out for some fun. Do whatcha want with 'em, I don't care. Peek on 'em, maybe join 'em..."

"Fuck off, man... hey, wait, five people just got out. They look... holy shit! Shit shit shit! One of them's the bitch from the Lagoon!"

"...Huh?"

Jake winced as the sharp crack of gunfire erupted simultaneously from the receiver and, faintly, from outside.

"...Alonzo? Yo, man, you there?"

The transceiver was silent.

Still looking as though he couldn't quite believe his ears, Jake put his laptop into sleep mode and stood up.

"What's going on?"

Pedro rushed in from the side room, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes. It seemed he had sharp hearing if nothing else.

"I think Alonzo's just bit it. He said the woman from the Lagoon was here."

"The hell? That's impossible. How the hell did she find us?!"

"Yeah, fuck if I know. Something's wrong. Nobody shoulda known we were here..." Jake murmured in a low singsong, slowly drawing his UCI Custom and shoving it under Pedro's nose.

"...unless they had an inside source, know what I mean? Hey, Pedro. You dropped a line to the Triad?"

Jake's tone was friendly, but Pedro went white as a sheet, almost foaming at the mouth with fear.

"O-o-of course not! I didn't even have the time to, even if I'd w-wanted to! Me'n Alonzo didn't even know what Roanapur was until you dragged us here this morning! How would I kn-know about the chinks?!"

"Yeah, you're right," Jake said, shrugging as he accepted Pedro's reasoning and withdrew his gun.

"Then what the fuck's goin' on? No way Stan did it... Ah, come to think about it, where's Stan? What's he doin'?"

"He's somewhere in the hallway over there, staring at the wall and talking to himself."

They went to check on him and found their illustrious leader tripping, so high his head was probably in the clouds, crouching in the hallway and murmuring desperately to himself.

"...Kapitan... no... I..."

"Stan! Yo, Staaaaaan! Anybody home?!"

Jake grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him hard, then slapped him smartly a couple of times. Finally, Stan looked up at Jake, muddy recognition appearing in his hazy eyes.

"We got trouble, bro. Trou-ble. Got it? Understand me? We are in deep shit, man!"

"..."

No use. Jake shrugged wordlessly to Pedro. Pedro, realizing that they'd lost another precious ally without even a single shot being fired, shook his head in despair.

"Hey, Stan. It's gonna be okay, got it? Just run out the back door there. Call our client, okay? Got it?"

"..."

Nearly unconscious though his eyes were open, Stan nodded, still mouthing words. Well, it looked like he'd understood. Jake couldn't afford to babysit him any longer. Writing Stan off as a lost cause, he let go of the druggie's collar.

"Hey, Jake. I'll take his rifle."

Perhaps unable to trust the Smith & Wesson automatic hanging from his belt, Pedro grabbed Stan's Dragunov from its place on the table, the night vision scope still attached.

"Yeah, whatever. He ain't in any condition to say no, anyway."

"...Yeah, I recognize him. He was part of the party last night. This's the place," Revy said quietly, looking down at Alonzo's lifeless face. The body had fallen face down and she'd had to kick it to turn it over.

"唉呦 (My my), that was fast."

Shenhua sighed, looking so put out that Revy almost asked her if she'd been expecting something else. At least it was clear that the Lagoon Company wasn't working together with the enemy.

The five killers who'd left the Cherokee turned their backs to the dark forest and looked up at the abandoned factory jutting up in the moonlight. Leigarch had chosen to stay behind in the car, enjoying a bit of quality time with his best friend, a certain white powder. His role in this was over, as long as none of the targets decided to make a run for it by car.

"Now, what plan we have for going in?"

"You need a plan? I thought I told ya."

Now that she knew for certain that Jake was in her sights, the fire inside of Revy flared up fiercely. She had become a human cruise missile.

"Only one rule in this plan. *Don't get in my fuckin' way.* That's all."

Drawing her cutlasses, the hunger for blood floating about her like a tangible aura, Revy stepped inside the factory without a second glance.

"♪How scary Revy is today.♪"

"How scary!"

"♪What do you think we should do, sis?♪"

The brothers Albondigas looked to Shenhua, their voices slightly subdued. Perhaps Revy's murderous intent had penetrated even their thick skulls. For her part, Shenhua was too busy thinking to be afraid.

According to Chang, four killers had escaped from the tanker. There probably would have been maybe one or two more on the ship that came to rescue them. That represented the entirety of the force that the enemy could field. Revy had taken out the sentry just a moment ago, so that was one down. But the abandoned factory was too large for four or five people to hole up in. If Shenhua's team just charged in without a plan, it was a safe bet that they'd probably miss one or two.

Even as Shenhua turned over the possibilities inside her head, the sounds of gunfire and frantic shouting drifted out of the open door. Cautiously peeking inside, she could see that there was someone standing high up near the roof shooting at Revy with a rifle, and another one who was shouting something at her.

"Mmm... Only two come to welcome party for bitch, yes? This not right... Tango Brothers. We go around to back door. Bitch can take care of self here."

"♪Around the back we go to kill.♪"

"To kill!"

"♪Catching anyone who runs away.♪"

"...You three very very need to shut the fuck up. Quiet now, and follow me."

Still arguing noisily, the four started around the factory to the right, heading toward the back exit.

Almost the moment that Revy stepped foot inside the factory, she was greeted with the bark of a Dragunov rifle coming from above.

It wasn't solely due to luck that she hadn't taken a bullet there. She'd been expecting an ambush of some sort and had immediately sprinted forward and thrown herself behind cover the instant she entered. The sniper had chosen that moment to try and fire.

Sniping a moving target was more the stuff of cinema and novels than reality—there weren't many snipers who could actually pull off those kind of shots. Naturally, the first shot fired at Revy had missed completely, and Revy realized in an instant that the shooter she faced was not the sniper from the Zaltzman.

A good sniper didn't just have great aim. The number one rule was *never to fire a shot that a chance of missing*. A sniper had to know exactly what the limits of his skill were, compare the situation at hand to said skill, and only pull the trigger when he could be sure of hitting what he wanted. Any sniper who didn't realize that was simply second rate. Revy could tell that whoever was behind the Dragunov's rifle now wasn't a professional. It was just some dumb fuck who'd fired instinctively upon catching sight of her.

"Hey, Revy! Nice of you to come to my place! Wanna fuck?" Jake called out to her from somewhere in the darkness.

Most of the machinery in the factory had never been taken away, leaving the inside of the building looking like a maze of steel. In other words, Revy would have to play a deadly game of hide and seek... not one of her favorite ways to fight by any means.

"Fuck off already, Jake! Go jack off to one of yer shitty internet posts!"

A second bullet from the Dragunov glanced off the floor in front of Revy, leaving a bright spark in its wake. The sniper was pretty bad, yeah... but not quite so unskilled that Revy could afford to write him off in her mind. His skills with a rifle were nothing to write home about, but he still knew exactly where Revy was. Probably using the night vision scope like back on the Zaltzman. Poorly aimed or not, it only took one bullet to end a fight. If she stuck out her head too often, who knew? The sniper might just hit the jackpot.

"Oh hey, you saw my site? I dunno what to say!"

Jake walked out into the open and revealed his position, secure in the knowledge that the Dragunov was covering him.

"So how's it feel to be a star on the internet? The eyes of the whole world are on ya, baby! Ain'tcha feelin' hot and bothered?"

Jake's cheerful voice brought back the memory of that shameful site in Revy's mind, reviving the rage she'd felt.

"I ain't a fuckin' sicko like you, ya cocksuckin' poet wannabe!"

"Aww, c'mon, Revy. You don't really wanna live your whole life out here in some no-name town, do ya? Are ya just gonna stay some gun-toting thug for the rest of your life?"

In contrast to the roaring blast furnace that was Revy's rage, Jake's voice was friendly and calm, as though he were a teacher lecturing a truant child.

"You got the gift, babe. It'd be a goddamn shame for someone like you to end up as piratin' fishbait. You got the talent to make it on another stage."

The words just served to enrage Revy more. His flamboyant preaching had allowed her to nearly pinpoint his location, but every time she tried to move to a place that would get her a clear shot, the Dragunov fired a warning from above, preventing her from moving. God fuckin' dammit!

"The fuck're you talkin' about, ya fuckin' psycho... The hell do you think you are, anyway? Huh?!"

"Let's work together, Revy. C'mon, think of it. Ultimate R and Cool J! We can be stars, baby!"

"...The fuck?"

"Hollywood ain't the only way to stardom these days. The times've changed! Anyone can find a way into the limelight. It's the internet revolution, baby!"

Jake's proposal was so preposterous that it actually served as a shock to bring Revy back from the boiling point.

"...How stupid are you? The Romulans brainwash you or somethin'?"

Her bubbling rage cooled for the moment, Revy finally began to think up a plan.

She needed to decorate Jake's ass with some 9mm parabellum piercings, and to do *that*, she needed a proper course of action.

First, she had to take care of the wannabe sniper above her.

"Any kinda talent you got, it can be enough on the net. The law, common sense? It don't matter, yo. All you need is a story and a character... you don't even gotta show your face! I proved that!"

Ignoring Jake as he babbled blithely on, Revy deliberately threw herself out from cover and rolled behind another piece of machinery. The Dragunov obligingly followed, firing at her new hiding spot. But that had been just what Revy wanted. She glanced upwards, gauging the sniper's position from the direction of the shot... he was somewhere near the roof. There. He stood half-hidden by one of the vents in the ceiling, aiming down at Revy.

"Us killers, we ain't gotta hide in the dark no more! Some ultimately cool skills're all y'need to keep ya goin'. Hey, didja know, in Japan they call their stars 'talents'. The Japs know what's comin' up the information superhighway!"

Jake's ridiculously grandiose speech continued, delving ever deeper into the depths of farce. Still paying him no heed, Revy made another calculated movement, watching for the Dragunov's muzzle flash. Yup, from the vents again. What a fuckin' dumbass. The sniper was so secure in the superiority of his night vision scope that he'd even neglected to switch positions between shots.

Come to think of it, while Jake was ranting on trying to convince her to switch sides, the man up in the rafters had kept firing with intent to kill. What was going on? Hell, the dumbass up there was probably just as surprised by Jake's sudden speech as she was. He was probably trying to kill her now and end it quickly.

"C'mon, Revy. I can see it now. Your fans're out there, waitin' for ya! The 21st century's gonna be the age of internet idols! You an' me together, ten thousand hits a day'll be easy!"

Having already tasted defeat at the hands of a sniper once, Revy had come prepared. She paused in retrieving her hidden card from its place on her belt; it wouldn't be courteous, she reflected, to leave Jake's grand speech unanswered.

"Hey, Jake... I gotta say I was wrong about ya. I thought you were just some crazy dumbass or somethin'."

"So now you know I'm not, right?"

"Yeah, of course."

Revy smiled... A corpse's grin, stretching dead like a slash from the Reaper's scythe across her face.

"You're somethin' *entirely new*, some sorta godawful *thing* so fuckin' terrible they don't even have a name for it. Fuck if I know what to call you. Maybe I'll drag yer dead body to some scientist and he can give it a fancy Latin name when I'm done with ya."

She pulled the pin on her flashbang before Jake could form a proper reply and tossed it high into the air.

The bang came first—the sharp sound of rapidly scattering aluminum and potassium perchlorate—and then the flash, turning night into day. For the sniper, peering through a light-gathering night vision scope, the effects were catastrophic. As the marksman above her staggered drunkenly, Revy gripped just one of her Cutlasses in both hands and aimed, slowly and carefully, at the disoriented man.

Revy's gun sported no scope, but even still she could clearly see the silhouette of a man starkly outlined against the dim light of the late evening sky. Like all beginners, he'd blindly assumed that the highest place with the best view was always optimal. He'd pay for his mistake with death.

Just one shot was all she needed. The Cutlass roared, a strangled cry was cut short, and the two objects of different mass fell together, Dragunov and corpse, a reenactment of Galileo's tests at the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

"...Heh, whaddya know. I got him."

She'd expected the Weaver stance to feel awkward, seeing as how she'd rarely used it outside of a firing range, but it seemed that once it came down to it, it was like riding a bike. Either way, with that obstacle out of the way, Revy was finally free to turn her attention to the main course. Quickly drawing her other Cutlass as well, she dashed down the corridors after her prey, the heady scent of blood flooding her senses.

Bereft of his partner, Jake tried to beat a hasty retreat, heading straight for the inner levels of the factory. Revy stopped him dead in his tracks with a few well placed shots right in front of his face.

"Yo, it's your turn now, *baby*. C'mon, lemme hear some more of yer business proposal."

"...Well, fuck me."

It was finally time for their showdown. Sensing that her rage and frustration were soon to be swiftly and violently alleviated, Revy grinned a predator's grin and licked her lips hungrily.

Stan crawled through the darkness, his consciousness flickering haphazardly back and forth over the boundary between the real danger he faced and hallucination.

The enemy was here. The enemy was near. Jake told him... run, through the back door.

But who was the enemy? The Mujahideen? The government? The Taliban? Who was he supposed to be fighting? Who did he have to kill? Who was chasing him? Was he in Panjshir Valley, or Turkey, or Greece...?

No, he was in Thailand. A port city called Roanapur. This place had nothing to do with his past.

But... why, then, was he being chased by the phantom of his Kapitan? She had made a glorious return to Russia. He was the only one left crawling in this filth. No. He mustn't remember. Those were but bygone dreams. But if so, just who was Balalaika?

Yes, Kosloff. I died. The soldier named Stanislav died. Only the empty shell of what he used to be continues to move mindlessly about. It crawls blindly, in search of heroin. No, please, don't look at me. I beg you, leave me be...

With trembling hands he grasped at the empty air. Perhaps he was trying to grab hold of reality, to keep his consciousness in the present.

A rifle... These hands need a rifle. My Dragunov, my partner. The only thing I can rely on. The smooth feel of its stock will wake me from this nightmare. But... it is not here. Where is it? Where is my rifle?!

He sobbed with anxiety. He didn't know where the back door was. He didn't even know which direction he had to run, only that the enemy was drawing ever closer. He couldn't move. If he moved now and was caught, he'd be killed...

Suddenly, someone was there, supporting. Large, strong hands gently tapped his shoulders. *...Stan-dono, have no fear. Have you come to your senses?*

An ally. It was a friend. The Vysotniki had... no, wait... who was this...?

...Head straight down this hallway. When you can go no further, turn right. Then you shall be able to escape. There is no need to be confused...

He managed to nod, struggling to shake off the disorder inside him. But the very next moment, another worry made itself known in his breast.

If Stan ran away, then what would happen to this unknown friend?

"But you..."

...Worry not about me. Now go...

The unseen man gave him a gentle shove to send him on his way. Only then did Stan's brain start to work again.

In his present state, he was only a liability. He had to leave as fast as he could. He couldn't afford to get in the way of his allies.

"..."

Breathing deeply, Stan followed the instructions he'd been given, staggering unsteadily down the hall.

Shenhua stopped, a strange sense of wrongness washing over her.

She hadn't felt anything for certain. If her senses hadn't already been set on edge, she would certainly have failed to notice a thing.

She gazed into the abandoned factory's darkness. Felt the subtle change in the essence of it.

Yes... Until just a moment ago, Shenhua's hunting instincts had passed on to her the feelings of her prey, the fear and anxiety making themselves clear through the darkness. But that had suddenly disappeared, as though the enemy itself had vanished without a trace. Had the target died of something like a heart attack, passing away silently in the inky depths of darkness?

No, that wasn't it... Shenhua narrowed her eyes and heightened her awareness to its limit, pressing her skills as a swordswoman to their utmost. There was, indeed, still a fleeing enemy. But the presence of that one had been overwritten by another. The presence of a hidden blade, something silent and transparent, but infinitely dangerous nonetheless.

"...Is about now time to be closing in, Albondigas. Are you ready?" Shenhua said out loud, deliberately calling out to her allies. Revy had killed one enemy, and since she was fighting two more on the other side of the factory, that left one, perhaps two at most, more for Shenhua and the trio to face. With a numerical advantage like that, she could afford to reveal her position in an attempt to draw the target in.

But... there was no response. Where three voices should have replied in a lively tango rhythm, there was only silence.

"这个王八蛋 (Son of a bitch)..."

She swore in her mother tongue despite herself.

Tres Albondigas, the youngest of the three brothers, *had* heard Shenhua call for them.

But his eldest brother, who should have been first to reply, was silent. As the youngest, his role was to chime in when his brothers said something... which meant, inversely, that if his brothers didn't speak, he couldn't just up and say what he wanted.

As Tres walked forward aimlessly, helplessly, a squelching noise at his feet made him shift his attention downward.

He was standing in a puddle of blood. The realization made him spin in place, looking about wildly, and soon enough his gaze settled on the body of his eldest brother, Uno Albondigas, draped lifelessly over a machine tool.

"U...Uno..."

Uno's throat had been torn wide open by some sort of hooked weapon, his face forever frozen in an expression of agonized shock. He'd been ambushed and killed so quickly he hadn't even had a chance to cry out.

Memories rose unbidden in Tres' mind, of the happy days he'd shared with his brother. Uno, who had always looked out for his younger brothers. There had been the time they'd argued about who had the better tan, and the time they all went together to look at the flowers, and that time they'd gone to look at the moon...

"Aaaaaaaaagh! Unoooooooo!" Tres cried, anguished rage coloring his voice—for he had looked up to his older brothers just as much as Uno had looked out for him.

"Cocksucker! Where are you?! Where are you, you murd-"

The thin hiss of metal cutting air was all the warning Tres got as he swung his Mossberg shotgun around blindly, before the shuriken buried itself deep in his skull. The keen blade easily pierced through bone and lodged itself in his brain.

From his vantage point on the catwalk high above the factory floor, Dos Albondigas, the middle brother, immediately realized the meaning of Tres' words abruptly cutting off.

Though he understood that both his brothers were dead, he kept his cool, calmly assessing the situation. Dos' motto had always been to look out for number one, regardless of what his siblings believed.

Both Uno and Tres had lost their lives to a silent killer. Not even a silencer would have been able to produce such noiseless kills. That meant that the assassin had forgone guns and had instead used a knife or similar close quarters weapon to strike silently from behind.

That, in turn, meant there was no need to move from where he was... Dos grinned in satisfaction.

The catwalk on which he stood was a completely straight line from one end to the other. Anyone who wanted to get at him would first have to mount one of the two flights of stairs on either end. In other words, Dos could cut off any attempts on his life simply by keeping an eye on those two points.

No matter how fast the would-be killer charged, Dos' Striker fully automatic shotgun would fire faster still. There was nothing to be afraid. All he needed to do was stay still, and victory was his...

Dos had no idea of the terrible power of the Orient's wonders, and so perhaps his confidence was understandable. Never in his wildest dreams could he have envisioned the assassin silently crawling up the wall and onto the ceiling, a soundless moving shadow, preparing to strike from above.

One final flash of intuition made Dos look up, and he beheld a huge man swathed entirely in an ebon black ninja outfit flying through the air. Like a jumping spider leaping toward its prey, the man grabbed Dos from behind and in the same instant kicked off of the catwalk, once again becoming airborne. His trajectory flipped him over in midair, leaving both him and Dos upside down, plummeting toward the ground below.

"Wha-"

Who could tell what thoughts flitted through Dos' head in the scant milliseconds before impact?

Dos was the only one to smash headfirst into the unyielding concrete. All of the fall's terrible shock was absorbed squarely by Dos' body, while the man who had taken him on his final flight bounced lightly away without a scratch. Such was the power of this fearsome technique, designed to transfer all of the force brought on by the weight of two bodies accelerated by gravity into one person's spine... the secret ninja art, *Izuna Otoshi*.

The assassin in black had slain three men in as many minutes, but he had no time to savor his victory. The moment his feet touched the ground once more, he threw himself backward. Shenhua's *liuyedao* passed within a hairsbreadth of shaving off his nose, instead cleaving an old steel drum behind him in twain.

Shenhua's twin *liuyedao* were connected by a long, sturdy cord. By using that cord as she swung or threw her blades she could become a killing machine, capable of creating deadly storms of steel that could slay at unimaginable distances.

Using this method, she'd attempted to decapitate her opponent from afar by flinging her blade, but he evaded the attack without even looking, as though he'd felt it coming. Not only that, but her cord suddenly went slack, the familiar weight at the end vanishing.

The man in black had used the blades hidden in the palm of his left hand to sever Shenhua's cord even as he avoided her sword. The ninja weapon, known as the *bagh nakh* by some, had been the tool that had torn open Uno Albondigas' throat, and also that which had enabled the man to climb up sheer walls.

Shenhua changed the grip on her remaining weapon, holding it like a *guonaodao* as she waited for her enemy to make his next move. She wanted nothing more than to comment on his clothes—for swathed from head to toe in light-absorbing black, and with his face hidden by a facemask, he looked for all the world like one of *those*, sprung straight out of a bad movie—but after witnessing his fearsome skill firsthand, his strange taste in clothes had ceased to matter in the slightest. Just the fact that he'd managed to disarm Shenhua of one of her weapons was proof that this man was a master of the highest caliber.

The man in black gazed at Shenhua for a moment, as though to gauge her skill, then slowly drew a straight and slender blade out from behind his back. And this time, Shenhua was unable to hide her shock.

What kind of fighting stance is that?!

She had never seen or heard tell of such a stance. No, not just that... it was so completely *wrong* in every aspect imaginable that Shenhua couldn't even begin to understand it. Even a cursory glance revealed countless openings in the man's defense, and everything—from where he placed his center of gravity, to where he planted his feet, and even the way he held his sword—*everything* about the stance was a bonanza of aspects that flew completely in the face of all she knew about kill-or-be-killed close quarters combat.

But even then... despite everything she instinctively understood in that instant, there was not a single element of hesitation in the way he held himself. She hadn't the slightest inkling of what kind of training had gone into creating such a stance, but she knew one thing for certain: it was deadly.

The man showed no hesitation in entrusting his life to this preposterous stance. It was clear that it had seen him through countless battles.

That was exactly why Shenhua felt threatened by this unknown factor. It meant that she *couldn't read how the enemy would attack*. Whether she chose to attack or defend, she couldn't predict how that stance would change to react. It was hard for her to imagine what



might happen if she chose to extend herself in a strike at one of those blatantly obvious openings.

For every second that passed without motion, anxiety and fear grew within her. Shenhua had fought and killed for many years, but not once had she ever encountered such a strange adversary.

The moonlight filtering down from the factory's open ceiling illuminated the man's eyes, shining from within the depths of that unknowable mask. They were blue. Blue eyes as deep as the dark ocean depths, so deep she felt like she might fall in and be lost. Even as she locked gazes with the man, Shenhua felt as though her will to fight, and even her ability to concentrate, were being absorbed by the fathomless depths in those eyes.

How? How can he be so skilled?! I can't even read his intentions...

She could sense nothing in the man in black's blade—not nervousness, not anxiety, not confidence or murderous intent or even the desire to fight. He was on a level far beyond such states of mind. His blade was like that of a buddha, transcended above earthly concerns... Shenhua found herself facing a presence so absolutely heavy and blank, it was like trying to read the intentions of a boulder.

The first to move would die. That was what her instincts told her. But just by keeping his stance, the man tormented Shenhua more with each passing second. Thanatos¹⁷ whispered reassuringly in her ear, telling her to charge in without thinking, and she felt cold sweat trickling down her spine.

...Damn it!

Just as Shenhua clenched her teeth, unable to ignore any longer the panicked cries of her senses, the man in black moved. But it wasn't the hand that gripped the sword. His left hand darted suddenly into his clothes, as though to bring forth a new weapon.

Even as he moved, Shenhua's *liuyedao* was already slicing through the air. It wasn't that she thought the attack had any chance of connecting. She had had no choice *but* to attack, gripped by the fear that if she didn't attack then, if she missed that instant, the man in front of her would surely devour her.

Instead of meeting her desperate strike with one of his own, the man in black hopped back.

...What?!

¹⁷ Greek personification of death.

A billowing cloud of choking white smoke suddenly surged up before Shenhua's eyes. The man's left hand had been going for a smoke bomb.

Flustered even more than before by her enemy's unexpected movements, Shenhua threw herself backward out of the smoke cloud and hid herself behind a steel pillar in an attempt to acquire a clear field of vision.

Free of the blinding smoke, Shenhua belatedly realized a change in the sound of the gunshots coming from the opposite side of the factory. Up until then she'd heard only intermittent rifle shots, but now the gunshots came fast and furious, as though two handgun users were exchanging fire. Had the man in black noticed before her, and retreated in order to help his allies?

"You bastard...!"

But even as Shenhua took a step forward, intent on chasing her opponent, a shuriken clove the air in front of her eyes, missing her by just the slightest margin and coming to a quivering stop in the steel pillar beside her. It was a clear warning, telling Shenhua in no uncertain terms that she was still being watched.

"Shit...!"

Shenhua hid behind the pillar once more. But no matter how much she tried to sense the location of her enemy, she couldn't tell from where he'd thrown the shuriken. The shadows were on his side, not hers. He knew where she was, and she couldn't even guess where he was... The cards were stacked too much against her. Had he left, or was he still watching? She had no way of knowing.

Furious at being entrapped, and trembling with fear at the skill that had done so, Shenhua cried out into the darkness.

"你是谁?! 有种的说出你的名字! (Who the hell are you?! At least tell me your name!)"

But only the echoes of her voice rang hollowly in the ruins... There was no reply.

As though a shadow born of darkness had no name to reveal.

Actually, the man just couldn't understand Chinese, but Shenhua had no way of knowing that.

Having lost Pedro far earlier than he'd expected, Jake found himself in dire straits.

To tell the truth, Jake hadn't been looking forward to, or even expecting, a one on one gunfight with Revy. That was the difference between the imaginary character Ultimate Cool J and his actor, Jake U. C. Jake had always tired his targets out first by throwing cheap hired guns their way, and then stepped in at the last moment to record the kill with his UC Custom. Naturally, there were certain differences between his blog posts in Deadly Biz and what actually happened, but hey. He was making entertainment, not a fucking documentary.

Either way, there was no way in hell he was going to take care of Revy without first withdrawing and getting some breathing room, and so he retreated hastily, focusing solely on keeping himself alive. But Revy had doggedly pursued, not losing sight of him for a moment... not giving him a single moment outside of the range of her guns. Her grim tenacity and ferocity reminded him of a piranha that had caught the scent of blood in the water.

Jake had fallen in love with Revy's skills at first sight, but now he found himself thinking that it might've been okay for her to be just a little worse with her guns. True, she was definitely good enough to attract a crowd, but more in the way that a caged beast would be than a seductive idol. Every time she fired and he blindly fired back, hoping against hope that the hasty spray of bullets would get her off his back, she seemed to become more and more inhuman. It felt like he was being chased by a T-Rex wielding pistols akimbo. Had this bitch really evolved from mammals like the rest of mankind?

With every ounce of his being focused on Revy—more accurately, on *surviving* Revy—Jake didn't notice the masked man who appeared silently behind him until he tapped him on the shoulder. Jake nearly had a heart attack.

"Fa, Falcon! What're you..."

"Stan-dono has safely exited the grounds. Jake-dono, you too should make haste."

Jake pointed at Revy, who was still sprinting at them with murder in her eyes.

"I'm tryin', yo! I'm fuckin' *tryin'*, but she's on my ass and she won't let up! Falcon, do somethin' about her! Fuckin', I dunno, *ninja* her ass!"

"...It shall be done."

Jake ran away without a second glance, leaving the masked man behind. Revy caught sight of him and faltered for an instant, recognizing the costume and simultaneously remembering that he should by all rights have been fish bait. But the part of her that was like a shark out for blood quickly shoved that aside in favor of pursuing Jake, dismissing the cosplayer as nothing more than a minor obstacle, a pebble on the road. All he had on him was a sword, or so it seemed.

"The fuck outta my way, asshole! Move or I'm gonna *make* you move!"

Revy brandished her Cutlasses threateningly, but the masked man had already grabbed a handful of ball bearings from within his costume, and even as she approached he threw his hand outward in an arc, spreading them on the ground before her.

It hadn't even entered Revy's mind that she might be stopped in such a manner. Unable to slow down, her boot heel came down squarely on one of the metal spheres, the bearing shooting out from under her and sending her crashing painfully to the ground.

"Owww... *Ow!* The *fuck?! Jesus!*"

Revy yelped as her behind made contact with the floor. Mixed in with the ball bearings the man had thrown were sharp caltrops, and the keen points dug mercilessly into Revy's hips.

"You motherfuckin' cocksuckin' dogfuckin' *cunt!* *I'm gonna fuckin' kill ya!*"

Revy had dropped her left Cutlass when she fell, but she raised the one in her right hand and aimed, this time aiming to kill the masked annoyance.

But before she could pull the trigger, the man exhaled sharply, firing the *blowgun* he'd raised to his lips. Detecting a minute difference in the weight of her gun, Revy made a split-second decision and removed her finger from the trigger. The man in black sensed his chance and ran, tearing through the darkness like a shadowy gale and vanishing without a trace.

Revy didn't even watch him go, instead staring dumbly at the dart stuck in the barrel of her Cutlass. She picked it out, noticing how it shone in the dim light—it had been soaked in some sort of flammable liquid. Nitrocellulose. If she had pulled the trigger, there was no telling what would have happened to her hand.

"Holy *shit...*"

Her rage disappearing in the face of her shock, Revy could only gaze into the darkness where the man in black had stood.

At least she had a story to tell Eda the next time they got together for some drinks.

...Ninjas really did exist.

Stan walked on, guided along the streets solely by the light of the moon.

He still hadn't entirely shaken off the heroin entirely, but for the moment, at least, he was free of the confused hallucinations that had gripped him just a minute ago. He could tell where he

was, and *when* he was. He knew where he was headed as well. If he walked straight through the night, he would reach the city limits of Roanapur before dawn.

He had no way of knowing whether or not his allies had made it out of the abandoned factory. If they were still alive and unharmed, his client would make sure that they would meet again, and even if none of them survived, Stan was still intent on finishing his mission alone, if need be.

It wasn't that he held any particular animosity toward Chang Wai-San, nor that he felt any particular loyalty to his client. He had never abandoned a mission midway; that was all. Now that he thought about it, perhaps that was the only thing about himself that he was sure of anymore. To call it pride would be laughable. But now that both his past and the honor that he'd held in his heart were in shambles, there was nothing else left for Stan to *cling to*.

Just when he was beginning to lose all sense of how far he'd walked... Stan stopped, feeling a threatening presence seep into the air.

The next instant, hard beams of light lanced out of the darkness, blinding him.

Two Mercedes-Benz's had been hidden in the thickets beside the road, cunningly parked so as to be nearly invisible to the human eye at night. Now they held Stan captive in the glare of their headlights.

Even as he instinctively raised his arms to cover his field of vision, Stan could see, through the blinding light, many shadows quickly exiting the cars. Their movements were not those of common thugs, full of meaningless swagger and wasted effort, but the swift and efficient actions that could only be carved into the body's muscle memory by countless hours of grueling training. If Stan had to think of an example... Yes. His old comrades would have moved so, deploying from the side door of a Hind that had just landed in a hotspot. The nostalgic emotion that swept through him, so preposterous an emotion to be feeling in his situation, soon changed into something far heavier and foreboding.

As his eyes became accustomed to the glare of the headlights, the first thing he noticed was that the men arrayed before him were dressed in paratroopers' field fatigues. And then, when he'd adjusted enough to make out the stripes on their sailor shirts, he realized that he'd seen all of their faces before.

Kosloff, David, Zamyatin. The best of the best of the Spetsnaz, with whom he'd plunged through the depths of Hell itself. The unforgettable faces of the Vysotniki...

"Ah..."

His knees shook. His throat grew suddenly dry.

The faces of these wraiths paid no heed to the line between reality and nightmare in this wretched world's end, Roanapur. How had they, who had always pursued Stan in the memories of his past, suddenly come forth to block his way?

"...I never thought I'd see you again as one of the living, comrade Junior Sergeant."

And one final figure revealed itself, slowly stepping out from the back seat of one car. She had cold blue eyes, like glaciers. One side of her face was scarred by burns.

She stood in front of Stan now, her officer's coat hanging loosely from her shoulders above a seductively cut business suit, leisurely smoking a cigar.

"Kapitan Pavlovena... You... You can't..."

"That name belongs on a tombstone somewhere. It isn't a name fit for someone walking among the living."

"Then..."

Stan stopped, his voice breaking with regret at the coldness in that voice.

"Then should I call you Balalaika? Leader of the mafia in this wretched city...? *Is that what you've become?!*"

The woman, known to some as Fry Face, to others as Balalaika, merely smiled as she gazed down at him.

"Yes. I see there's no need to explain the situation. That makes things easier."

"..."

It was a smile that held all the sins and betrayals of the world, the sort of grin that only a hyena, tearing away at the rotten flesh of crime in the lightless underbelly of the world, could make.

Bereft of the strength to even stand, Stan fell to his knees.

"How, how have you come to this..."

"Chatting with you about bygone times would be amusing in its own way, but that isn't what I'm here for tonight," Balalaika said calmly, heedless of Stan's tears.

"I've come to find the meaning and the value of what you tried to do. If you are unaware of the balance of power in Roanapur, you are probably also unaware that what you tried to do would



have been a severe blow to us. If that wasn't your intention, killing a former comrade would sit ill even on us. "

Stan only knelt with his head bowed, showing no sign that he had heard her. And as for Balalaika, there was no warmth, no pity in her eyes as she gazed down upon him.

"Stanislav Kandinsky. If you forsake this mission and surrender yourself to us, we will take full responsibility for any and all repercussions that may arise as a consequence of your doing so. We will strive to our utmost to ensure your safety. But... if you do not take this offer, then we will remove you by force."

In those candid but unyielding words Stan heard voice of his old Vysotniki commander, the unfaltering will which had stood fast in the face of torture. Unable to resist, unable to refuse that voice, Stan slowly raised his head and looked into the eyes of the woman who called herself Balalaika. In her figure, wreathed from behind by the moon's soft light, he saw the unmistakable beauty and sublimity he remembered.

Now, even Stan could not deny it any longer. This woman was no fake. She was no shoddy impostor. She was his commanding officer, Kapitan Pavlovena herself.

"Kapitan..."

"Stanislav. I once fought side by side with you on the battlefield. You are a trusted comrade-in-arms, one to whom I entrusted my life many times. The courageous actions you showed then were more than sufficient to be honored. That is why I will not force you to make a decision—I ask of you only your choice. I will give you time to think. Tomorrow, at six in the evening, I will be waiting at the Roanapur harbor. Know that it will be your last chance to contact us."

Balalaika turned, as though she had said all she had to say. But Stan couldn't let her go, not without mustering the last remnants of his broken voice, calling out to her retreating back.

"Why?! Why has a... a hero like you become nothing but a petty criminal?!"

Balalaika stopped, listening to his tortured plea.

"Answer me, Kapitan! What happened to the pride you held close in Afghanistan?! What happened to your honor?!"

She looked over her shoulder at him, her lips turned upward in the approximation of a smile.

...No, it couldn't be called a smile, in any normal sense of the word. It was an expression that looked foreign and terrifying on the face of a human being; it was more like a *rift* in her features, a bottomless pit that would devour all that dared come near.

"...Yes, of course. You never even went back to our homeland, did you. Then perhaps it is not so strange that you cannot understand."

And from the rift burst forth a torrent of hellish magma. If one had to express it as a human emotion, perhaps one could have called it laughter. An expression of violence, infinitely evil, infinitely destructive, a glimpse of something that would not rest until it had burned all that dared stand in its way to ash... That was the sound of Balalaika's mirth.

"Very well, I will teach you, Stanislav. Just as you lost your pride, we were forsaken by it."

Stan froze with shock, staring at the laughing woman in front of him. And in the wave of emotion that came just before the sadness, he understood the truth.

...No. This woman is not Sofiya. The Kapitan would never laugh like this.

Then this must be none other than Balalaika...

Only then did Stan realize that he was facing the one they called Fry Face in hushed whispers, the queen of evil who was feared by all.

"To the country that called itself Russia, the battlefield of Afghanistan was nothing more than a nightmare to forget. The meaningless memory of a hideous dream that had been dreamt once, long ago, when they still called themselves Soviets. And so... what were we to that new and shining country but shades, crawling out from the depths of that nightmare? That is what happened to us, we who were given the damning title of 'Afghanistan veteran'. We lost our chance to die, and in doing so we lost our place to live."

There was *something* there, in the endless abyss of her manic laughter, that had transformed *Kapitan Pavlovena* into *Balalaika*. It was whatever had happened to them when they returned home from the battlefield, the prejudice that had been leveled at the weary heroes. Something that Stan had never experienced.

"That is why we are still dreaming. We do not care any longer where we are, as long as the smell of blood and sulphur is there with us. Everyone here has already realized that without the lies we called causes and honor, we can continue dreaming as much as we want, as long as we want."

"Kapitan..."

An indescribable sense of loss overtook him, choking the words before they could leave his throat. Stan couldn't even begin to imagine what had happened to them upon their return home.

Balalaika stopped on the verge of turning away once more, looking back at Stan. She whispered to him then, the tone of her voice suddenly almost wistful.

"Comrade Junior Sergeant. You are still dreaming as well, are you not? Can you feel those dry sands? Can you hear the howling of the wind?"

"..."

"Then you are a *happy man*. I find myself envying you."

Her piece said, Balalaika stepped into the back seat of her car, her coattails gently waving in the wind. The Vysotniki followed her.

The two Benz's turned, their engines roaring a challenge to the silent night as they returned to Roanapur.

Only Stan was left, bereft of even the strength to stand.

Chapter 4

The sun had just peeked out from the horizon when Balalaika entered her office in Bougainvillea Trading's headquarters, and immediately her features froze in a mask of rage. The reason for her ire was immediately apparent: seated in *her* chair, smoking one of *her* expensive Havana cigars, looking for all the world as though she owned the place, was Tatiana Yakovleva.

"...Could it be that you do not want anyone other than yourself sitting in this chair, comrade Balalaika?" Tatiana asked, smiling disarmingly. Yet it seemed she remembered having her collar grasped in Balalaika's iron grip, for she quickly rose from her seat and moved a safe distance away.

"Or perhaps, your irritation arises from the fact that I touched *your possessions*? Even though, if I am not mistaken, this cigar was bought using the organization's profits."

"What *irritates me* more than anything is the sight of your face, Cheka. Make your choice. You can either leave this room on your own two feet, or *be transported out of it on a stretcher*."

Her voice was far too cold for her words to be an empty threat; Balalaika almost seemed to be hoping that Tatiana would choose the latter. Even then Tatiana's gloomy smile remained, its owner safe in the knowledge that she was outside of Balalaika's immediate reach.

"May I ask why you are constantly so aggressive? I could be giving you the help you need."

"If you truly believe that, you need to see a psychiatrist, you two-faced spy."

"It wouldn't kill you to calm yourself a little when you're *in dire straits*, comrade."

An atmosphere of deadly tension filled the room. Balalaika kept her silence, her wordless glare threatening unprecedented pain, while Tatiana calmly continued.

"It pains me to be looked down upon as a double agent, but I suppose it is a burden I must bear. It was always my mission to detect the worries my comrades might be holding in their breasts, and offer them salvation before it was too late."

"The role of a father with a teenage daughter. Do you honestly think I'll believe any of your garbage?"

"...Then let me ask you this. How are you going to conclude the matter of Stanislav Kandinsky?"

Tatiana finally revealed her best hand. Balalaika's glare grew sharper than ever before.

"Cheka whore..."

"You soldiers are always trying to solve your problems with bullets. Either shoot your old comrade-in-arms, or turn your guns outward against everything in order to protect him... Isn't that the only choice you have? A sad truth, I must say... though if it were me, I could take care of the situation in a far more flexible manner," Tatiana said, carefully observing Balalaika's expression from behind her square glasses.

"We KGB remnants still have our connections from the information networks raised during the Cold War—they are our greatest weapons. And our worth lies in the fact that we can control and create truths and falsehoods as we please. Changing the whereabouts or the status of a single person is well within our power. Transporting him out of Roanapur or even framing the Zaltzman assault on someone else would be child's play. What do you think, comrade? Do you understand, now, how valuable my help can be?"

"...What a joke," Balalaika said, dismissing Tatiana's offer with a sneer. "Your audacity truly knows no bounds, Cheka. Any *help* offered by your kind is never anything more than bait set for your pathetic traps. If you honestly thought that I'd bite, you must be more delusional than I thought."

"..."

Tatiana didn't reply, hiding her feelings behind an expressionless mask. But once Balalaika drew a pistol from within her jacket, the former KGB found herself sweating profusely.

"There is one thing I'm curious about, suka¹⁸. Where did you hear the name Stanislav? Now that's something I would dearly like to hear."

"...Are you really thinking of shooting me? Have you forgotten I was dispatched here on orders from Moscow?"

"A necessary measure to prevent the leaking of information. Ah, though of course, I wouldn't dream of boring you with meaningless empty threats."

Balalaika grinned as she pointed the Stechkin's hefty barrel at Tatiana, her expression that of a devil drunk on the heady fumes of cruelty.

"I'm going to *shoot until you beg me to let you talk*. First your kneecaps, then your fingers, one by one... Hmm, what should I shoot next? I'll still have eight rounds left."

¹⁸ **Сукa**. Bitch.

It was a declaration that would have had any street punk wetting themselves, but Tatiana's wit and courage had not yet declared surrender. The smile she showed Balalaika was not entirely a bluff, though her voice came out as little more than a whisper.

"Naturally, the one who told me about Junior Sergeant Stanislav was *someone with whom you shared the secret*."

"...A member of the Vysotniki?"

"Oh? Is that surprise I detect in your tone? Surely you understand that there are those even among your lot who have a sound head atop their shoulders. They, at least, know how much they stand to gain by allying themselves with us former KGB."

Betrayal, backstabbing... These, above all else, had been the tools the KGB had relied on to hold the great Soviet Union in check, and they had been astonishingly effective in keeping the USSR's totalitarian system going. Even in the present day, there were no agencies in the world quite as adept as the KGB had been at persuading supposed allies to turn on one another.

It was hard to believe that one of the steadfast Vysotniki would fall victim to their honeyed lies, but it was a fact that Balalaika had given an order specifying that none but the Vysotniki were to know that Stanislav Kandinsky was in Roanapur.

"Their name?"

"I couldn't tell you if I wanted to. *There is my safety to consider, after all*," Tatiana said. Balalaika understood perfectly what she meant.

"Are you going to shoot? Can you imagine what would happen if you were to pull the trigger? Would our mystery informant not assume that you knew of them once they heard that I had been tortured? Of course, as a member of the glorious Vysotniki, such a person would never be so weak as to sit and wait placidly for death. On the contrary, they would most likely act before you came to exact the price for their betrayal... In other words, you would have a *completely anonymous* potential backstabber among your ranks."

"...The way you Cheka drone on never ceases to astonish me. I told you to talk, not to babble. Or is this your way of pleading for your life?"

"No, this is a warning. If you want to shoot me, then *do it after you find the spy among your soldiers by yourself*. And until then, *give no sign that you know something is amiss*."

"Hmph, you should have just accepted your death," Balalaika said with a snort, lowering the Stechkin. A hardened soldier like her would never pull the trigger because of personal feelings alone, especially not when such a threat had presented itself. But that didn't mean that the flames of her rage had been extinguished—in fact, they had become compressed, stored away

in anticipation of an even greater explosion to come. Her blank, utterly expressionless features served to unnerve Tatiana more than any snarling tantrum.

"You get to live another day. But know that this time, you've truly become *my enemy*. I'll make you wish you'd died easily today."

"...Don't forget that you have tasks set before you that you could be taking care of, instead of wasting your energy threatening me."

With the gun out of sight, Tatiana seemed to regain a little of her composure, the gloomy smile once again creeping onto her face.

"You don't need to remind me. The matter of Stanislav will be taken care of today. I have a meeting with Chang at noon tomorrow, at the Golden Swinging Nightclub, and it would be a mark on my pride to see him with this problem still unresolved."

"...I see."

Had Balalaika noticed the dark light that suddenly flared in Tatiana's eyes?

"Now, get out of my sight. If I have to look at your face any longer, I feel like I'll succumb to my urges and strangle you to death with my bare hands."

"As you wish. Today will be a busy day for you, after all."

Tatiana nodded politely and exited the office. Left alone in the room, Balalaika looked out the window at the faint light filtering through the curtains as the new day broke over Roanapur.

Her glare was like that of the legendary basilisk, threatening to destroy all that it fell upon.

The items retrieved from last night's battle lay arrayed on Chang's desk, in the CEO's office of Rehe Pictures, Inc.

Casings from three different handguns and a rifle. Revy had testified as to who had fired what, so there was no need to look into that. The real problem lay in the bizarre objects to the side of the spent casings, completely unrelated to any sort of gunfight.

Two star-shaped shuriken.

Eleven caltrops.

Chang's expression as he stared down at them was supremely nonplussed, that of a man who had gone rummaging through his own closet and come up with something extremely unexpected.

"What baffles me more than anything is that even though I sent you and Revy, we have *more dead allies on our hands than dead enemies*."

Shenhua, who had been standing quietly before him, looked down as though Chang's words had shamed her.

"The fault rests entirely on my shoulders. I foolishly underestimated the enemy and split our forces."

She could converse with Chang in Cantonese. Free of English's stifling confines, Shenhua's voice carried a seductive charisma that perfectly complemented her natural beauty.

"Was he really as good as you say? This... ninja fellow, that is."

"If I were to meet him again, I would *take off my high heels*," Shenhua replied, fighting spirit burning in her eyes.

"...Hmm."

Shenhua always wore stiletto heels over five centimeters long no matter what, despite the fact that she was a dual blade wielder who by necessity had to physically exert herself on a regular basis. Chang knew for a fact that she didn't wear them just to look pretty.

The truth of the matter was that she had taken to wearing the cumbersome footwear as a way to keep her edge in Roanapur, where the chances of facing an individual skilled in the martial arts were slim to none. For Shenhua to declare that she would take off her high heels meant that she was dead serious—one could say that she was at Defcon One. The nuclear missile silos had opened, revealing their deadly payload.

"...I don't doubt you. I know how much weight you put on your pride. Someone like you telling me so frankly that he's a true threat makes me shiver more than any horror story."

Shenhua was in good standing not only with Chang, but with the Triad's Thailand branch as a whole. The knowledge that she had been utterly dominated by one man despite having three allies at her side forced the Triad to reevaluate the threat posed by the Zaltzman assault team. In fact, this new knowledge cleared any doubts as to the Lagoon Company's trustworthiness, for Revy had taken out two of these formidable enemies last night by herself. Even the members of the Black Society had no choice but to acknowledge Two Hand's valor, for she had thrown herself head-on at an enemy who even Shenhua had been ill-prepared to face.

"But honestly, a ninja..."

Now that he thought of it, Dutch had hesitantly mentioned being assaulted by "some sort of ninja-ish person" in passing the night before the last. With so many witnesses attesting to his existence, the threat couldn't be denied.

But...

Chang picked up one of the shuriken from his desk and stared at it questioningly.

"Shenhua. Have you ever heard of the ninja of legend using weapons engraved with initials?"

"...That bothered me as well."

The letters "OMC" were emblazoned in the middle of the shuriken. On closer examination, the metal had a cheaply manufactured feel to it, and the flashy letters actually looked more like some sort of company logo than a person's initials.

"This is just a theory, but... weapons such as these might be the sort of toys that are sold to fans. Perhaps the ninja bought them, engraved his mark upon them, and sharpened them to use."

"You're suggesting that our real, straight-from-the-books shadow warrior bought the sort of toys you might find being sold in a cheap magazine ad?"

"...Yes, you're right, it's preposterous. I don't know what I was thinking. Forget I said anything."

"Well, no. You see... Hmm..."

Chang tilted his head from side to side, as though pondering whether to voice his thoughts, and finally muttered, "You see... I can't help but feel like I've seen this logo somewhere before."

Rock returned to the office from a grocery errand to find Revy and Benny hard at work, and in strangely high spirits.

"...What're you two doing?" Rock asked, despite himself. His curiosity was understandable, for the tense atmosphere that had fallen over the Lagoon office as of late was nowhere to be found.

"Heheh. Well, Benny here came up with a nice idea to fuck with that dipshit Jake."

Revy's smile, which had become a rare sight in recent times, was so bright and clear that it became unnerving. The sharp smell of acrylic paint assaulted Rock's nose, and he stepped closer to see that she was hard at work painting something that looked vaguely like a pistol.

"Revy said she'd chip in for my new monitor, so I decided to roll up my sleeves and give this a try," Benny said. And his smile, just like Revy's, was uncharacteristically wide and innocent... Though considering that he was the sort of guy who could wear that same smile while hacking into a military database, looks could be deceiving. Indeed, though his smile was that of a young boy, his gaze as he stared into his backup 15 inch monitor, typing line after line of code, was more like that of some dangerous beast of prey.

Rock carefully placed the bags he was holding on the table, his instincts telling him to be wary. When the phone chose that moment to ring, Rock was the only one with hands free to take the call; the other two hadn't even looked up from their work.

"Hello, Lagoon Company. How can we--"

"Yo, it's me, Rowan! And who is that I hear on the other side but my good friend Rock? Sup, dawg? Got any sweet pussy lately? Eh?"

"Uhh... well, not exactly... haha."

The rambunctious, high-pitched voice on the other side belonged to none other than Rowan "Jackpot" Pigeons, owner of the city's largest strip theater, which was located on Rachada Street. The Lagoon Company sometimes delivered goods to the theater for him, but as far as Rock knew, they didn't have any stuff that belonged to him just at that moment.

"Y'know, Rock, I do declare that you always sound whipped. Why doncha come on down and loosen up a little? Why, just last week I picked up two fine Swedish hos who could use some tender lovin'..."

"No, no, it's fine, really. Err, may I ask why you're calling? Dutch isn't in right now..."

"Naw, I got business with your little miss pirate, Rebecca. Give her a holler, will you?"

"Huh? Uhh..."

Rowan had solicited Revy on the possibility of an SM show or two many times in the past, but she'd invariably replied with a polite invitation to shove it where the sun didn't shine. Still, he'd never actually called before, preferring to make his offers in person.

"Hey, Revy, Rowan called. Says he's looking for you. What should I tell him?"

"Hmm? Oh, I was waiting for him. I'm a little busy right now so gimme that little phone over there, hands free," Revy said, showing unexpected good cheer. Rock changed the small phone to its speaker setting and set it in front of her, the feeling of foreboding hanging over him growing with every moment.

"Hey, Jackpot. How're things goin' over there?"

"Everything's ready! I nudged all the shows out of the way, so yours is gonna be tonight's main event! I jacked up prices by thirty percent and I'm still already sold out!"

Rowan suddenly quieted down, almost sobbing over the speaker.

"...Revy... I... I don't know what to say. You don't know how long I've been waitin' for this day to come... You're finally gonna put on a show for me!"

Rock almost yelped out loud in surprise, but Benny showed no change in expression. Perhaps he'd already known.

"Look, I'm only doin' this just this once, got it? I mean it. An' if you film me I'm gonna fuckin' shoot you. Only my people're gonna take pictures. Understand?"

"Of course, of course. What do you think I am, crazy? I'll just reserve one of the front row seats for myself, sit back, and enjoy the show!"

"Hmph. Anyway, what about the actor I asked for?"

"Heheheh, I'm glad ya asked. I got the fattest son of a bitch you ever clapped on eyes on, just like you wanted! They call him the Sweaty Whale, and he's a real screamer. Why, I even hear he's a bit of a celebrity in, uhh, certain circles."

"Heh, I'll be lookin' forward to meeting him. I'll make it worth your while."

"Of course! I got my best people in charge of your stage lights and special effects! Tonight's gonna be the biggest night of my life!"

Revy snorted. "Glad to hear it. Anyway, I'll see you at ten tonight."

"I'll be waitin', baby!"

Rock fidgeted for a few minutes after Revy hung up, unsure of what to say.

"...Revy, didn't you say that you'd rather die before you ever took Rowan up on his offers?"

"Huh? Ah, well, I guess you could say I had a little change of heart."

Revy grinned from ear to ear, unable to suppress her glee. In fact, it was clear that she was suppressing the urge to laugh out loud. From Rock's experience, the only things that Revy enjoyed so much were bloody massacres, but...

"Hey Rock, why doncha come and watch too? I'll tell Rowan to get you a first row seat... Though, I can't guarantee you won't pick up a new fetish or two by the time I'm done."

"Wha... what're you talking about?"

Revy as an SM mistress... The mental image wasn't hard to call up at all. One didn't have to make many adjustments from the way she normally acted, after all. No, perhaps just a bit of makeup and some sultry acting...

Leaving Rock to mull over his fantasies, Revy turned to Benny and showed him the fruit of her efforts.

"Hey, Benny. This look okay?"

"This" was a block of something—styrofoam, perhaps—that had been roughly carved into the shape of a gun and colored silver, evoking a sense of déjà vu in Rock. He thought it over for a moment and soon realized that it was an imitation of Jake's beloved gun, the UC Custom.

"Yeah, looks fine. I'm going to touch up the pictures anyway, so you don't have to replicate all the details."

"Heheheh, gotcha. We're all set, then."

Revy spun the fake gun deftly around her trigger finger, pulled out a Lucky Strike from her pack of cigarettes, and lit up.

"Revy! You just used paint thinner, remember? You have to air out the room before you smoke."

"Don't be such a pussy. What, you think a spark is gonna blow up the room or something? We ain't sittin' in a goddamn powder keg, man."

"..."

Rock felt left out, unable to enter the conversation, yet found himself reluctant, even a little afraid, to ask just what they were up to.

"Umm... Well, I guess I'll take some of this stuff out to the boat. I'll be back soon."

"Huh? What's the rush? Grab a bite before you go at least. C'mon, there's still some pizza left over."

"Thanks, but I'll pass. I'm not really in the mood to eat anything greasy right now. I'll pick up something on the way there."

Having made his flimsy excuses, Rock backed out of the office and got back into the Plymouth Road Runner he'd left illegally parked outside. He stopped before putting the key into the ignition, leaning against the wheel for a second and thinking about what Revy would look like that night.

"An SM show... huh..."

Revy had invited him to come and watch, but he had his reservations.

He was curious, granted, but somehow he felt that if he did actually go, he'd end up plagued by strange dreams for quite some time after.

Luckily, he still had some time left until ten at night. He'd be able to think it over as he made his way back to the office.

The sweltering day finally ended, the western horizon flaring with the deep crimson of twilight.

The Roanapur harbor stood deserted, the people who made a living there gone for the day. Balalaika stood alone on the docks, looking out at the gold-tinted sea, the sea wind caressing her face.

The six o'clock deadline she'd given to Stanislav Kandinsky had long since come and gone. But she moved not a step from where she stood, her ice blue gaze never wavering from the setting sun.

She didn't even turn at the sound of measured footsteps heading down the dock toward her.

"...Stood up by some churlish fellow, I see?"

Chang Wai-San came to a stop beside Balalaika, his coat left open to flap lazily in the wind.

"And you? I didn't think you could afford to be walking around in the open like this."

"You're right, but I thought a change of pace would be nice. Sometimes, a guy just has to put his work on hold and go chat with beautiful women. And with an incredible sunset like this as the setting, how could I resist?"

Balalaika took out a Parliament and lit up, smirking at Chang's joke.

"I suppose the setting might meet your standards, but as for the other criteria, I must admit some skepticism. I don't even know if you and I share any common interests outside of our work."

'You have a point," Chang said, idly clenching a Gitanes cigarette between his teeth as he leaned on a handrail.

"...In that case, what do you say we talk about something that's work for me, but doesn't have anything to do with you? All you have to do is just listen to me grumble about my day."

"That sounds fine."

Chang lit up his Gitanes in lieu of an introduction. He took a slow, thoughtful drag, then began to talk.

"You might have heard that I've been bothered by some strange pests lately. Why, just yesterday night, I got a tip telling me where their nest was and sent a few people to take care of it... but did you know, that nest was in the strangest place. It was an abandoned factory, completely deserted, but when we lifted up the floorboards there were tons of weapons, ammo, and rations underneath. A mountain of Kalishnikovs, enough for a company of soldiers to start a war."

"..."

Balalaika's silence urged him on.

"I heard that the Viet Cong used to bury those guns in the furrows of their rice paddies, but these were individually packed in wooden boxes, oiled and cushioned with sawdust. So I thought of who in this city might possibly care for Kalishnikovs so much, and... Well, I don't think I even need to tell you the answer, do I?"

Balalaika chose to save herself the trouble of answering. Just as Chang suspected, those guns had indeed been hidden there by Hotel Moscow.

In the unlikely event that the Vysotniki lost their foothold in the city of Roanapur, each and every member had been instructed to escape the city limits and then regroup at predetermined rally points. There were several armories in places around the city that had been prepared in anticipation of such an event, and the abandoned factory chosen by Jake and his allies had been one of them.

"A preposterous selection of assassins, a plan full of holes. A tip that just happened to come in at just the right time, and clues of Hotel Moscow at every corner... Why, I feel a bit insulted at the very suggestion that we're dumb enough to play along with this kind of scenario."

"Hmph. Not very forgiving to the playwright, are you?"

Chang shrugged, looking out aimlessly at the sea.

"I know how you work. The only people in this city who know how you operate better than I do are taking dirt naps six feet under. That's why I can be sure that you'd never plan something so idiotic. This is just some sort of play made by someone who wants to trap you."

His observation was no revelation to Balalaika. The left side of her face, still beautiful and unmarred, betrayed no emotion.

"So about that unknown someone who stole your boat and directed my would-be assassins to one of your hideouts. Have you considered that they might have set their fishing pole on your very doorstep?"

"As much as it shames me to admit it, you may be right."

Chang paused in the face of Balalaika's frank confession, as though mentally debating whether to continue. At length he said, "But what bothers me most is the bait that our fisherman is using. Look, Fry Face. Just who were you waiting for here?"

Balalaika kept her eyes on the sunset, a small smile drawing her lips upward.

"You're certainly asking a lot of questions for someone who claims to be talking to himself, Chang. I thought all I had to do was listen? Or perhaps this is all part of business as usual?"

"No, of course not. Just think of it as a clumsy man prying into the past of a woman who should be left well enough alone."

"..."

They were silent for a time, both of them gazing absently at the cigarette smoke wafting in the breeze.

"Is the sniper Dutch talked about... one of yours?"

Chang broke the silence first, and Balalaika nodded.

"We once walked the same path. And like us, he missed his place to die."

"Have you talked to him?"

"If he felt like surrendering himself, he would have appeared here before sunset. I think I've been dumped."

The matter finally came out into the open, coaxed out by careful conversation. Yet still, Chang was not satisfied.

"...So, what are you going to do?"

"I'll have to carry out my warning."

There was no need for Balalaika to explain what that warning entailed, nor any need for Chang to ask.

"It's clear that losing Chang Wai-San would not be beneficial for us either, considering the power balance of Roanapur. Even more so if we were to be implicated in the situation."

"That's good to hear."

Unlike years ago, when Hotel Moscow and the Triad had fought tooth and nail for control of Roanapur, there were other organizations in the city—the Colombians and the Italians—poised and ready to snatch up any opportunity. In the case of an open battle, even the victor would come out much the worse for wear, and it was certain that the smaller gangs would choose that moment to pounce before they could recover. For the two evenly matched superpowers of Roanapur, anything that might result in actual conflict had to be taken care of, swiftly and decisively.

"But here's the thing. Whatever happened between you and him, the fact remains that we lost four of our people. That's more than enough cause for us to seek retribution. You don't have to take the bait. The wrath of Taishan Fujun¹⁹ will fall upon those who thought up this farce of a play."

Balalaika raised one eyebrow despite herself, unable to completely hide her surprise at this unexpected proposal.

If this whole thing really was the result of an internal power struggle within Hotel Moscow, Chang's Triad was nothing more than an innocent bystander that had been caught up in the violence. In that case, it would have been easier for Chang to demand some sort of compensation.

¹⁹太山府君. The Lord of Mount Tai, a powerful Chinese god.

"...If you left this to us, you wouldn't have to expend the effort, and we'd be able to clear any suspicion about animosity between us. Wouldn't that be better for you?"

"If we were talking about work, of course. But you see, all I'm doing is *just being an unstylish sort of guy*."

The tone of his voice was light and airy, but Chang's eyes behind his sunglasses were completely serious.

"...Look, Balalaika. We're mobsters, the hyenas of the world. If we turned up our noses at rotten meat, we'd starve to death. But on the other hand, we shouldn't need to eat that rotten meat *if we don't have to*."

"..."

"Having to kill an old friend... I can't think of meat more rotten than that. If you had to in order to survive, I suppose you'd have to close your eyes and give it a bite. But if you want to throw it up, then do it. Even dogs know how to do that much."

"What are you trying to say, Chang?"

"*Sit back and watch*, Balalaika. This is a problem that the Triad will take care of. You just prepare the condolence flowers."

Balalaika laughed suddenly, as though unable to contain her mirth any longer.

"How soft of you. That's why you'll never get rid of your nickname, Babe."

"Fry Face..."

Chang stopped, swallowing his words. *Something* in the quality of Balalaika's laughter had made him stop.

"Chang, why do you think I am still here? The promised time has passed, and I have no more business here. Then why, do you suppose, I am still standing here alone?"

"..."

"I thought to myself that I wanted to enjoy this glorious sunset for a while longer. It's not like me, I know. But I's just that happy. I almost want to propose a toast in celebration. Because *he didn't come*."

Perhaps her eyes were not looking out at the southern sea, but instead at the arid earth of a faraway land. A land stained with blood far darker than the light of the setting sun... The homeland where her madness had been born.

"He chose continuing his fight over the comfort of ignoble safety through surrender. Even here, in the back alleys of Hell, he has chosen to plow forward, unbowed. He is one of us. Even now he dreams the same bloody dreams, our souls as one... Ah, it is only now that I can finally revel in the joy of reunion. We parted ways for a while, and we ended up on opposing sides. But that is all. We have been dreaming the same dreams, striving to die on the same path."

Now, the sound of Balalaika's laughter was unmistakable, the revelry of one of Hell's denizens. It was the sort of laughter that belonged to one who would enjoy rivers of blood, someone who would welcome the touch of sulfur and brimstone.

"That's why *I can't let you have him*. I will fulfill his wish. I will quench his thirst. I will bless him, and I will bury his dreams. Chang. You said that this was a hunk of fetid, rotting meat, but to us, it is nothing less than *an exquisite smorgasbord*. He and I, we are both trying to fulfill our ideals in this place. The will to fight, and to die fighting, runs through our veins."

Chang, who had been listening without comment, absently looked at the long stick of ash that had been his Gitanes and muttered, "...This is madness. You're saying that you're..."

"Right. *We're even worse than mobsters*. Don't think to judge us by your standards."

The sun vanished over the horizon, and the sea began to darken with the color of night. Urged on by the now chilling sea breeze, Chang straightened up and flicked the butt of his Gitanes into the ocean.

"My apologies. I really did kill the atmosphere."

"It's fine. Sometimes it's good to talk about something other than work for a change."

Chang raised one hand in farewell without looking back as he left the docks. Left alone and staring at his back, Balalaika's gaze was unexpectedly serene and muted, but there was nobody around to see.

Even as he completed lap after lap, from the Road Runner's open trunk to the warehouse and back again, Rock was unable to rid himself of the lurid fantasies running through his head.

Revy's show, aptly named "Mistress Rebecca Gifts a Slave with Her Punishments." Yes, he supposed there would be a whip. No, maybe candles. What the hell did the guy look like, to be nicknamed the Sweaty Whale, anyway?

She would probably dress in something risqué. But what would a woman who normally wore a bikini masquerading as clothes have to wear, to be even more racy?

He was still trying, and failing, to get the fantasies out of his head when he realized that he'd moved the engine oil and the tungsten welding rod and the oxygen canisters to the warehouse, and now he was finished. A glance at his wristwatch revealed that it was 8:15. It was about time he made the decision on whether or not to drop by Rowan's.

"Hmm...."

Well, he'd decide after locking the warehouse. But upon shoving his hand into his pocket, Rock finally realized that he'd forgotten to bring the keys.

Had he dropped them? Had he left them somewhere in the car? Backtracking through his memories, he realized that he'd left them at the office. He'd set the keys down together with his bags before taking Rowan's call.

"Damn, now I have to.... wait, what...?"

Rock froze, suddenly realizing something else, far more important than his absentminded mistake. If he had left the keys to the warehouse at the office, then *how had he gotten in?*

He hadn't suspected a thing, his mind preoccupied with useless thoughts, but now that he concentrated, he couldn't remember taking off the lock at all.

In other words... the warehouse's doors had been open from the very beginning.

Silence filled the darkened warehouse. The quiet was suddenly oppressive and hostile. Rock stood frozen to the spot, unable to move a muscle, and looked at the open warehouse door.

The five meters from where he stood to the outside seemed more like miles. Who had forced their way inside before he did? Perhaps the mystery intruder was hiding somewhere even now, observing Rock's every move.

He looked right, and left, and slowly turned to look behind him... and found himself face to chest with a huge man in black clothes standing right behind him.

"Ga-"

Blue eyes snapped open behind the black facemask before Rock could do more than take a startled breath, and...

"Tomare!!"

The sharp cry slammed into Rock's eardrums, paralyzing his mind.

"Tomare kono katana agerukara tomare, onegai onegai tottekure, suware katana agerukara suware..."²⁰

The bizarre voice echoed and reverberated as though it was actually bouncing around inside his head, slowly paralyzing both his mind and his body. Rock saw nothing, heard nothing. His entire world shrunk down until all that was left was a pair of blue eyes and the rhythm of that strange chant.

It couldn't be... Was he being hypnotized?

But by the time he realized it, it was already too late, and Rock's consciousness sunk into darkness.

A frigid wind blew over the barren lands.

The time was winter. The place, Salang Pass in eastern Afghanistan.

The members of the 318th rear distraction brigade's 11th squadron, known informally as the Vysotniki, greeted the new year from their tents. Even their humble wish of spending the new year quietly in the warmth of their barracks had been dashed when the Hind helicopter scheduled to pick them up was shot down by guerrillas.

The Soviets' absolute aerial superiority had disappeared once the Mujahideen got their hands on Stinger heat-seeking ground to air missiles. The expensive hi-tech weapons had made their way from the hands of the accursed Americans through Pakistan, trickling down into the ranks of the guerrilla resistance.

The Mujahideen had previously stood against the Soviet army's cutting edge technology armed with only their knowledge of the terrain and unbending will, but the behind-the-scenes intervention of the CIA had seen the arms gap slowly decrease, the Soviet offensive grinding to a halt.

On a night like this, even the proud, fierce members of the Vysotniki found themselves longing for home, just once. Thoughts filled their heads of their families, celebrating the new year without them in their faraway homes.

²⁰ 止まれこの刀あげるから止まれ、お願いお願い取ってくれ、座れ刀あげるから座れ。 "Stop, I'll give you this katana, so stop. Please please take it. Sit, I'll give you this katana, so sit." A ninja chant that confounds the senses, allowing a skilled practitioner to effortlessly hypnotize any enemy.

"It's already been three whole years since I welcomed the new year with some piping hot pelmeni²¹..." Corporal Saharov muttered, staring blankly into the soothing orange campfire.

"It'd be hard to even find a Christmas tree in this place," Master Sergeant Chiganov said, commiserating with the other man. "There's nothing here but rocks and sand. I didn't expect anyone to be able to survive here, much less try and fry our asses with bullets and missiles... Ah, it brings tears to my eyes."

In Russia, every family, no matter how poor, did their best to eat as well as possible on New Year's Day, for they believed that the variety of things they would eat during the year was decided by the dishes on the New Year's dinner table. Considering that, it was no surprise that the soldiers were feeling uncharacteristically gloomy, sitting huddled around a campfire, cramming tasteless military rations into their bellies.

"Now that I've seen Afghanistan, I know for certain that the Yankees lied about going to the moon. Those bastards probably came here and took pictures. I'm certain of it."

"No kidding. I wish we could go back to Earth. Don't you agree, Kandinsky?"

Stanislav Kandinsky took the canteen Chiganov had offered and shook his head, remembering the endless frozen plains of his homeland.

"This place is not so different from home. No, the lack of ice here makes it easier to bear."

Chiganov frowned, nonplussed by the unexpected answer.

"...I can't believe you. Look here, boys. Our Sami²² here says that this hellhole is better than his beloved home."

Stanislav, who came from the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, stood out from the rest of his comrades, who were all city boys. If he had met Saharov or Chiganov as civilians, the differences in their values and lifestyles would certainly have left them unable to understand one another. But here, wearing the same uniform, risking their lives on the same mission, nothing could stand between them.

It was Stanislav Kandinsky's second new year on the battlefield, and there was no guarantee that it would be his last. It was likely that his two year mandatory service period would be extended due to his promotion to junior sergeant.

But Stanislav did not lament his fate. Of course, it wasn't that he didn't miss his home. And it was also true that this military service was grueling and harsh. But even considering those

²¹ A Russian dumpling with a thin skin, often filled with assorted minced meats.

²² An indigenous people who inhabit the western and northern regions of Russia.

factors, Stanislav had a place here. He thought to himself that suffering together with his comrades in this place, trusting each other with their lives, had more meaning than any other life—or indeed, any other death—he could imagine.

Stanislav glanced askance at the cause of these noble thoughts. She sat by the fire with everyone else, choosing to keep her silence as she worked at fixing a rifle.

Sofiya Irininskaya Pavlovena. The only reason that a lieutenant like her was commanding the Vysotniki was because everyone higher ranked than her had already been shipped home in body bags.

Her cheeks were smeared with soot, not makeup, and her bright golden hair had been mercilessly hacked short and stuffed unceremoniously under a beret, but still her natural beauty shone through. Whenever they charged through a hail of enemy bullets, Stanislav offered a prayer that her flawless face would be untouched, his own safety never crossing his mind.

There were more than a dozen snipers among the Vysotniki who could have become the top sharpshooters of any other squadron, but Lieutenant Pavlovena's skills with the rifle stood head and shoulders above even these formidable men.

She herself didn't seem inclined to talk about it much, but there were rumors that if the Kremlin had not boycotted the Los Angeles Olympics, she would have gone for the gold as an Olympic sharpshooter. There were even some who said she would be the next Lyudmila Pavlichenko²³.

The rifle she was fixing at that moment was none other than Stanislav's own Dragunov. She had stepped in and taken it after watching him struggle futilely to fix it himself. It was a shameful thing for a sniper to give up his rifle, his partner, to the care of another person, but if that person was the lieutenant, Stanislav did not feel embarrassed. In fact, he even felt honored.

She was every Vysotniki's mother, their elder sister, their guardian angel. Just her silent presence at the campfire made their plight bearable. Thanks to her, they could forget the fact that they were tired, and dirty, and huddled together, shivering from the cold of a foreign land on the dawn of the new year. The more optimistic among them, like Saharov and Chiganov, could even find it in themselves to joke around.

"Junior Sergeant Kandinski, does everyone in your homeland shoot through fierce wind like you?" Corporal Saharov asked, snapping Stanislav out of his inner thoughts.

"No... No, my father didn't. But my uncle was far better than me. He could even smell the wind and tell how many wolves were in a pack."

²³ A female sniper who served in the Russian army during World War 2. Known for holding the woman's record for confirmed kills at 309.

"...So that's it," Master Sergeant Chiganov said, shrugging merrily. "Our Shaitane Badi's skills were just part of the Sami repertoire!"

Lieutenant Pavlovena rose, and immediately all gazes swung to focus on her.

"You could be the greatest marksman in the world, but if you keep taking care of your rifle like this, I can't call you a proper sniper," she said brusquely, handing the Dragunov over to its owner. It seemed that she had been listening to the conversation as she worked.

"Lieutenant, my rifle..."

"Mmm. It's no use. I can't fix it with the tools we have here."

The elevation dial on the PSO-1 scope of Stanislav's Dragunov had come loose, making the scope functionally useless. If even Lieutenant Pavlovena had admitted defeat, then it was beyond the power of anyone in the squadron to fix.

"Honestly, Junior Sergeant... Your rough handling of your rifle's scope has been a constant problem. How many times must I tell you that this is a precise and delicate instrument?"

"My apologies, Lieutenant."

Now Lieutenant Pavlovena's sharp glare swung around to fix on Master Sergeant Chiganov, who had been watching the situation unfold with amusement.

"And I distinctly remember warning you as well, Master Sergeant. Don't use people's homes as a source of humor. If you prove yourself unable to take my words to heart, I have other ways of making you understand."

"Ack, no, that won't be necessary, Lieutenant. I... My apologies. I spoke out of turn."

Chiganov immediately schooled his features and apologized to Stanislav.

Stanislav was not a full Russian by blood; his grandfather had been a Nenets. He had long since grown accustomed to such playful jabs, but the fact that the Lieutenant saw fit to cover for him in such situations simultaneously embarrassed him and made him a little happy.

"Anyway, Junior Sergeant. Remove the scope; it won't do you any good now. And thank the designer who thought to leave iron sights on the Dragunov. With your skills, you should be able to cover distances of at least three hundred meters with your eyes alone."

"Right away, Lieutenant."

It had been quite roundabout, but her words could be taken as praise, and Stanislav removed his scope feeling quite lighthearted indeed. Objectively, losing the use of a night-vision scope in such a situation was no laughing matter, but even that fact itself served as an additional source of humor to Stanislav.

...It had been a cold and cruel place, a place where Death sat at his side, liable to take him at any time into the darkness of the frigid night. But on the other hand, there had been a type of warmth there, different from the heat of a stove, or the feeling of hot food in his belly.

Everything was lost on the far side of his memories... Before Master Sergeant Chiganov had been blown to bits by a direct mortar hit. Before Lieutenant Pavlovena had been captured and tortured. Before Stanislav, left alone, had succumbed to the allure of drugs. The very memory was like the dream of a previous life.

The peaceful nostalgia grew distant, swathed in thick fog. He returned to the present to feel someone feeling his left arm for a vein. In preparation to plunge in a needle.

"...Ah...?"

Stanislav came to, and found himself in an unfamiliar place.

He felt a soft mattress under him, covered with crisply folded sheets. He was lying in a hotel bed.

He tried to remember how he'd ended up in such a place... but the cold prick of a needle at his arm melted his thoughts into nothing. The gift of heroin made all the concerns he'd held inside himself seem like nothing more than so many insignificant worries.

He remembered... He remembered trudging onward through the night. But where had he been? The moonlit desert? The back alleys of Istanbul? Or...

Yes. He had met someone. He had cried, true tears flowing down his cheeks. He couldn't remember how many years it had been since he had cried like that. The pain that had struck him then had been one he hadn't felt for a long time, something different from the sharp agony of withdrawal. It was a pain that constricted his mind, not his body.

"...Stan? Can you hear me? Stanislav Kandinsky."

He opened his eyes at the sound of his name and found himself looking at a woman with long red hair. She looked like a beautiful angel, holding a blessed syringe in one hand.

"...Why didn't you go out to the docks? Didn't Sofiya call you?"

His scattered mind focused just the slightest amount.

The docks... 6 PM... *your last chance...*

But who had told him that?

"...No. Nobody called me..."

The redheaded angel shook her head and sighed in exasperation.

"Sofiya tried to help you. Are you saying that you're turning down her offer?"

Don't you dare talk about her like that.

But she pushed him down before he could fully rise, the shout dying in his throat. Her soft whispers tickled his ear.

"What's wrong, Stan?"

"That was Balalaika. Not the Kapitan."

He spat out the hated name like a curse.

Balalaika. Her infernal laughter rang in his ears.

She shared a face with his bygone hero... but she was a devil.

Yes. He remembered now. Yesterday, the devil had offered him a deal. A deal to *give up his last pride* in exchange for safety.

Stan laughed helplessly.

Of course. I will not give up. I could never give up. Because...

"The Kapitan... The Kapitan would have kept fighting. *She would never surrender.*"

He remembered the valleys, set ablaze by the setting sun. The valkyrie with half a face staring down at the battlefield, heedless of the howling wind. The sight of her glorious features.

"That's why... I..."

Rouge-colored lips covered his own, stifling the words before he could give them voice.

Soft suction tugged at his lips. A tongue flickered over his gums. The heroin angel offered more distraction, and more fog fell over his already clouded mind.

Even then Stan mustered his last effort, hanging desperately onto one last thread of willpower.

"...I, I won't give up on this mission. I will see it to its end."

"Very well. If you must."

Her breath tickled his ears. The female scent overwhelmed his senses, guided his hands to slide over smooth skin.

"Then complete your mission, Shaitane Badi... Kill Chang Wai-San. You must kill him. That is your... last mission."

"Mission..."

He wandered aimlessly. Over snow-white skin.

The flow of time melted. The chains of causality faded away.

Lost in a sea of pleasure and confusion, Stan still held tightly onto his final shard of will.

Mission...

Yes. This time, he wouldn't run away.

Face it. Complete the objective. And die with honor.

Die to atone for everything that slipped through your fingers like so many grains of sand.

Jake knocked on the door of room 509 of the Lafette Roanapur Hotel as he'd been instructed over the phone. The door opened immediately.

His client, the redheaded woman he knew only as Jane, stood inside, wearing a bathrobe. This was only the fourth time he'd actually met her face-to-face. The first time had been when she'd offered him the job, the second when she came on the boat to ferry them away from the Zaltzman, and the third when she'd driven them to the abandoned factory.

It went without saying that Jake had no interest in her identity, or even what she was after. There was an unspoken rule in the business, that one simply did not dig too deep regarding that

sort of thing. Granted, she was a fine piece of ass, and if only her chest had been a bit bigger, he might've been tempted to approach her for real.

"Where's Stan?"

"Resting inside. Falcon's not here yet, but..."

She stopped, distracted by the sudden knock on the French window leading out to the balcony. Drawing back the curtains, she was greeted by a man in black silhouetted against the night sky, hanging upside down from above the window.

"...You know, bro. I know those clothes're cool an' all, but didja ever think about, y'know, walking into the goddamn lobby dressed normally or somethin'?" Jake said, holding the window open.

The man in the black facemask slipped wordlessly into the room, chose a spot where he could see all the doors and windows, and leaned silently against the wall.

"Is this all there is, then?"

The redheaded woman seemed unperturbed, despite the fact that her original team had been whittled down until only three survivors were left.

"Well, no matter. We're just back to where we were before we picked up Caroline Morgan's Tortuga pirates."

"Really? That's really what you're thinkin', babe?" Jake said, visibly angry.

"The Triad's already on their guard. Ambushes ain't gonna work no more. Those chumps from the torpedo boat're lookin' for a piece of us too. Hell, it'd probably be easier to go kill the fuckin' Pope now than Chang."

"Oh, are you saying that you're scared, Ultimate Cool J?"

Her seductive voice carried a taunting tone, but Jake only snorted instead of taking the bait.

"What I'm *sayin'* is, I'm out, bitch."

"..."

"Am I supposed to think it was just bad luck that those Lagoon fuckers were friends with Chang? What about our new hideout gettin' attacked the same fuckin' day we got there? I been in this biz for a long time, but I ain't never seen shit go down as strange as now."

Jake took a step toward the woman, his body hunched forward aggressively.

"...Why the hell did you want a fuckin' junkie like Stan to be our leader, anyway? You really want Chang Wai-San dead? Or maybe, just maybe, you put this all together but never expected us to make it?"

"It seems I'm being the target of unwarranted suspicion," the woman said mildly, completely unfazed in the face of Jake's intimidating words. She sat down on the sofa and crossed her legs, putting a light to the end of a Pianissimo cigarette.

"If you don't think you can do it, you don't have to."

"Yeah, whatever."

The woman frowned now, surprised by Jake's ready acceptance. She'd expected him to demand more pay, but the conversation was flowing in a different direction from what she'd predicted.

"...I'm shocked. Did you really come all the way here from LA just to go back empty-handed?"

"Huh? Empty-handed? Nah, I got a little somethin' for myself."

Jake hadn't the slightest intention of telling Jane about his new plan involving the two-handed gunslinger, Revy. He didn't care anymore how much he would or wouldn't get paid for killing Chang. All of his attention was now focused on the titillating and dangerous woman of his dreams.

"See ya. Tell Stan I said bye. And tell him to stop shootin' up so much, god damn."

Jake stopped with the door open, suddenly remembering that there was someone else in the room as well.

"Yo, Falcon. What're you gonna do, bro?"

The man in black finally broke his silence, measured speech issuing forth from behind the ebon facemask.

"I have heard tell that Chang Wai-San is a dark lord who rules this foul city with an iron fist. My blade is destined to strike down evil wherever it may hide, and so I must see this mission to its end."

"Uhh... yeah, okay, whatever. Well, good luck with that, I guess."

The man waited until Jake had closed the door before swinging his gaze to Jane, then said, "However.

"As Jake-dono said, it is true that the mission is being impeded by unfortunate factors which are beyond mere happenstance. And again, he was right in saying that Stan-dono is in no condition to lead our team... Therefore, I have no choice but to part ways with you."

"...What do you mean?"

"This one will cut down Chang alone. You will not have to put yourselves in danger."

The man moved swiftly once more to the open French window, but stopped at the last moment as Jane reached out for him frantically.

"Wait! If you don't listen to me, I won't pay you!"

"...I follow only the mandate of the heavens!"

He vanished into the darkness beyond the balcony, his last words ringing in the room. Left alone, the woman could only sigh in exasperation and take a deep, comforting drag of menthol and nicotine.

She hadn't been expecting that at all, but in the end, they had only been pawns to confuse the enemy. As long as they stayed in Roanapur and raised a proper commotion, they would serve adequately albeit unwillingly as part of her plan.

She let out a breath and checked the time. The hour hand of the clock was almost at ten.

After making sure that Stan was still fast asleep in the adjacent room, she took the phone and carried it over to the sink, switched it to speaker mode, and dialed an international number. She was making a call to Japan. Considering the time difference, it was probably midnight in Tokyo, but she was sure the receiver would pay no heed to the late hour, considering the circumstances.

She removed the hairpins from her hair as she waited for the call to connect, tossing the red haired wig to one side and letting her brown hair loose from its hair net.

Soon enough, a low voice came from the speaker. It was speaking in Russian.

"...It's me."

"My apologies for calling so late, comrade Laptev. I bring tidings of the situation in Roanapur."

The woman switched smoothly to Russian as well, carefully massaging facial cream over her cheeks.

"Ah, excellent. How are things going? Are our plans to rout that Afghanistan reject suka proceeding smoothly?"

"Yes, comrade. There were a couple of unexpected trouble spots, but nothing I couldn't handle. I'm still well within the projected budget, as well."

"Hmph."

It was clear even over the phone that Vasili Laptev was struggling to hold in laughter. He was the boss of Hotel Moscow's turf in Shinjuku, Japan, and also one of the leaders of the former KGB faction within the organization.

The woman went on massaging her face with practiced, automatic movements, her voice gaining confidence as she spoke.

"I'm poised on the verge of initiating the final stage of our plan, and I merely wanted to ask you about which one to put into motion. Plans A and B seem risky at best, most likely impossible at this point. Shall I go with Plan E instead?"

"Hmm... Not what I'd been hoping for. But I suppose it won't matter."

Laptev sighed, though from the tone of his voice he wasn't put out at all.

Plan A had been to have Balalaika ask for KGB connections in order to spirit Stanislav away to safety. Then they would have added interest to the debt incurred by that favor, slowly eating away at Balalaika's authority within the organization.

Plan B would have been initiated had Balalaika chosen to protect Stanislav on her own. Then all that would have to be done was wait until the right moment to leak that information to the Triad and cause friction. No matter what the result, Balalaika would lose face within Hotel Moscow, branded as a weakling who let her emotions get the better of her. But even this plan was timid compared to the last one.

"Understood. It will probably happen at noon tomorrow."

Their final choice was Plan E. They would have Stanislav go ahead and assassinate Chang Wai-San, then blame everything on Balalaika, and finally fan the sparks that arose into the roaring fire of full frontal confrontation.

"Even if Hotel Moscow ends up losing its foothold in Roanapur, if that Afghanistan reject loses her power as a result, *it'll be worth it*. I can't stand the thought of her. I've lost count of how many of my old KGB and GRU comrades fell victim to her hounding."

"I agree. I'm proud to participate in a plan which will avenge our fallen comrades."

All traces of makeup finally removed, the woman began to clean her face with facial cotton soaked in beauty wash. Gradually, a face completely different from the one that Jake would have recognized emerged from beneath the cosmetics.

Transforming her face beyond recognition with just the bare minimum of makeup was her specialty, after all.

"Once Balalaika is thrown out, there's going to be a lot of scrabbling over the power void left behind. Naturally, there'll be spots opening up among the higher-ups as well, and when the time comes I'll be sure to mention your name to our leader."

"I'm honored, comrade. I will contact you with news of the results tomorrow."

"I'll be counting on it."

The woman towed off the last traces of moisture from her face as the line went dead and reached for a pair of square glasses.

"My big chance has finally come."

Tatiana Yakovleva smiled sensuously at her reflection in the mirror.

He could hear the sound of someone praying, from far away.

Rock regained consciousness slowly, drifting upward from the black depths into awareness.

"...Sha, to, pyo, rin... Zai, retsu, jin, kai... Zen."

The chant continued from somewhere by his side, the meaningless syllables droning on and on.

He opened his eyes. The first thing that greeted his eyes was the ceiling of a cheap motel.

From the faint light seeping through the firmly drawn curtains, he could tell that it was only a little brighter outside than it was inside. That meant that it was dawn, or perhaps just before sunset. It was hard to tell, since he didn't know how long he'd been out.

Rock realized he was lying on a futon on the floor, not on a bed. He must have been there for quite some time, judging from the aching soreness at his back.

The shadows in the dim room wavered unsteadily from time to time. Candlelight was the sole source of illumination inside.

And right next to one of the candles he could see a huge man, dressed from head to toe in black.

"...Sha, to, pyo, rin... Zai, retsu, jin, kai... Zen."

A scroll hung on the wall, the character nin (忍) written on it in sweeping brush strokes. A straight sword sat on the sword rest in front of it, and two fat candles burned brightly on either side of it. The man sat cross-legged with his back to Rock, facing the scroll, his fingers gathered in a hand seal.

"...Sha, to, pyo, rin... Zai, retsu, jin, kai... Zen."

"..."

Now that he listened carefully, Rock could finally make out what the man was saying. He wondered, idly, if he should bother to point out that he'd gotten the order wrong.²⁴

The man seemed to have noticed that his prisoner had regained consciousness. He stopped his chant, bowed toward the scroll, and turned to face Rock.

There was no mistaking it. It was the man who'd assaulted Dutch and later met a grisly fate in the sea a couple of days ago. Of course, it was impossible to see his face due to the black mask, but Rock didn't think that there could be another person in all the world built like that, who dressed quite like *that* to boot.

Why had he been kidnapped? Rock froze where he lay in nervous anticipation. The man silently took an earthen bowl, filled it with a greenish powder, added hot water from a kettle by his side. As Rock watched, he stuck some sort of rod into the bowl and began whipping it fiercely about.

"...Wait..."

Is that a tea ceremony? was what Rock wanted dearly to ask, but he hesitated with his mouth open. He still hadn't decided on whether to actually ask it or not when the man placed the finished bowl of tea on his upturned palm, carefully turned it once, and presented it respectfully to Rock with both hands.

"..."

He didn't really want to drink it, but who knew what might happen to him if he refused? Rock hesitantly took the bowl from the man's hands and sipped.

²⁴ The Kuji-in, the nine syllable mantra in Buddhism and Taoism which Falcon is chanting, is normally recited in the order of Rin, Pyo, To, Sha, Kai, Jin, Retsu, Zai, Zen.

The taste surprised him so much that he spoke despite himself.

"...Huh? Hey, this is pretty good."

The way it had been made bore only a passing resemblance to the proper procedure, but the deep, soothing scent that flooded his nose calmed his nerves and woke him up. As Rock watched, the man gathered his hands and bowed deeply to him, his forehead nearly touching the floor. It seemed that, for the moment at least, the man didn't intend to harm him.

"Uh, hey. Umm... If you don't mind me asking, who are you?"

The man lifted his head and replied, his voice deep but quiet.

"I am but a formless shadow, and therefore have no name."

Rock heaved a silent sigh of relief; strange reply or not, at least it had been in plain English. But it struck him that it was a strangely roundabout way to answer a question, and after a moment of thought he asked, "Then, err, what do people call you?"

"Shadow Falcon."

Well, that was simple.

"Ah... Okay. Well, Mister, uhh, Falcon. What're you going to do with me?"

"As long as you do not resist and acquiesce to my requests, it would please me greatly to have you as my honored guest."

The quiet voice from behind the facemask *sounded* serious enough, but nonetheless Rock still had no idea what was going on.

"Well, that kind of depends on what you do, but I suppose that's alright. But why did you bring me here in the first place?"

"You are clearly from the homeland of ninjutsu, Japan. I was merely struck with awe at the fact that you saw through my *suiton*."

Rock cocked his head to one side, wondering what the hell he was talking about, then suddenly remembered the conversation he'd had with Dutch on the Lagoon on that night. Falcon must have been eavesdropping from wherever he'd been hidden.

Rock gulped and finally asked the inevitable question.

"So, Mister Falcon. Are you, you know, one of those? A... a ninja?"

Rock's cheeks reddened at the absurdity of the question, but Shadow Falcon only nodded once, slowly and severely.

"I do not wish to brag, but this one has holds a thirtieth dan in the Kouga Death Shadow style of ninjutsu."

"Dea, death... shadow, you say... Hah... hahah..."

There was only one thought filling Rock's head.

I want to go home...

"Well, I mean, you know, we're on the verge of the 21st century and all, so isn't it a bit late for ninjas? No, well, I'm Japanese, granted, but still..."

Rock floundered, searching for the proper words, but Shadow Falcon showed no sign of taking insult. Instead he rose silently, removing a small booklet from behind the wall scroll and walking back.

Gingerly taking the offered booklet, Rock saw that it was quite old, the pages yellow with age and limp from constant use and accumulated dampness. Some of the pages were even on the verge of falling out altogether. Even at a glance it was obvious that it was the result of some cheaply done mass offset printing job. On the tattered cover page was a silhouette of Sho Kosugi—probably printed without the slightest regard for copyright—and below it, written in English, Rock could just barely make out the words "KOUGA DEATH SHADOW ☆ NINJUTSU SHINAN SHO."

On the copyright page at the second to last page of the booklet, instead of an address, there were merely the letters OMC

"...If you don't mind me asking, what's this OMC thing?"

"The letters stand for *Oriental Mystic Collection*. An organization that has provided this one with many ninja items."

"...Let me guess, they sent you that scroll and the sword too?"

Shadow Falcon nodded. A horrible feeling began to weigh heavily on Rock's mind.

"Can I ask one more thing? Where did you learn about this OMC thing?"

"I discovered them in the advertisement pages of *Black Belt* and *Inside Kung Fu*."

"..."

Rock didn't even know what to say to that.

To put it simply, this man was nothing more than the hapless victim of a half-brained mail ordering scam. Rock couldn't say how or why Falcon had ended up falling so far, but it was obvious that somehow he'd ended up becoming a killer and had drifted through the cesspool of the underworld until he came to Roanapur. It was almost heartbreaking, how a person's life could go so wrong.

Rock flipped through the pamphlet again, realizing from the font that it wasn't even a cheap print job—the pages had simply been printed straight from a word processor document. As for the contents, they were full of the sort of ridiculous training methods one might expect to find in a bad 80's ninja movie. Running at full speed with a straw hat placed against one's chest and making sure it didn't fall off. Blindfolding oneself and picking out the sound of a single needle falling on the ground amongst many. To make things worse, some bare minimum of effort had been expended to make it look like a training manual; stark font on each page numbered the bizarre training methods from "1ST DAN" to "30TH DAN."

...Suddenly, Rock remembered what Falcon had said just moments before.

"...Wait, did you say you held a thirtieth dan?"

"It is so."

Shadow Falcon nodded calmly.

"No, but wait, if you... Wait, you're telling me that you can do everything written in this booklet?"

"It is so."

Falcon agreed once more, showing not the slightest hint of arrogance. He was merely stating a fact.

"...This bit about planting hemp and jumping over it every day, too?"

Rock pointed to a page, and the blue eyes inside the mask clouded over with nostalgia.

"At first it seemed a trifling task, but the true test of my abilities began with the third month."

As far as Rock knew, hemp could grow more than three meters high in just a hundred days, and considering that the recently set world record for high jump was just under two and a half meters...

"...And this part about walking over wet washi²⁵ without tearing it?"

"Every step was a battle against myself. When I was yet untrained in the ways of the shadow, it took four days to traverse five meters."

In other words, that meant that he'd kept up a state of heightened concentration for four days straight, without stopping to eat or drink or even sleep.

Rock stared once more at Shadow Falcon's body. Even shrouded in formless black clothing, his thick pectorals, sturdy shoulders and neck, and tree-like biceps and thighs were readily apparent. And yet his waist was relatively thin for a man of his size, the tightly cinched belt making it clear that there was not one ounce of excess fat on his body.

He wasn't just a large man. He was a man possessed of a body which could make the greatest sportsmen and the strongest bodybuilders go green with envy.

If this man had actually believed everything in this phony training manual and, through trial and error and unimaginable effort, *actually completed every single exercise in the book...* Yes, in that case, such a superhuman body would not be entirely unbelievable. But what was it that had driven him to persevere through such hardship? This was beyond the limit of what simple determination or belief could achieve.

"...Why did you want to become a ninja so much? Did you watch too much Teenage Muta-"

Falcon's eyes suddenly flared with rage, his quiet voice rising to a roaring shout.

"*Speak not of the turtles!!*"

Rock unconsciously shrunk back, reacting instinctively to the sudden and terrifying change in the man's behavior. But soon enough Falcon, too, seemed to recover, and bowed his head low.

"...There can be no excuse for my loss of control. I see that my training is still incomplete; I offer my humblest apologies."

"N-no! That's fine! I'm the one who's sorry! I shouldn't have said that."

Rock added a new rule to the list in his head: Never mention the turtles.

Shadow Falcon, on the other hand, drew himself up to answer the question, his eyes growing unfocused as he delved deep into his memories.

²⁵ A type of paper made in Japan, made of paper mulberry fibers. Tougher than normal paper.

"I... Yes, that's right. I only wanted to become stronger. I wanted to change myself. I wanted to stop being bullied at school. But..."

The blue-eyed ninja paused, giving the scroll on the wall a deeply meaningful glance.

"After countless days meditating on the character nin (忍), I came to a revelation. What is important is not the sword (刃), but the heart (心) that supports it."

"Oh... Okay... Hmm..."

Would whoever had thought up OMC feel guilt at beguiling an innocent boy with such a preposterous scam and leading him so far astray from a normal life? Or would he smile and sit back in his chair, content at a job well done?

"...But wait, you even ordered the sword in the mail? No, no. That can't be."

Suddenly overcome by curiosity, Rock ignored the voices in his head telling him this was a bad idea and pointed slowly at the sword on its rack.

"Uhh, if you don't mind, could I take a look at that sword?"

The ninja considered it for a moment and then, apparently having decided that Rock was trustworthy enough, nodded and removed the sword from its resting place.

"It is a dangerous blade, and I bid you to exercise the utmost caution when using it."

Rock took the warning to heart, gulping hard as he carefully drew the sword from its scabbard.

...The blade had been carefully honed and polished, but no matter how meticulously they were cleaned, weapons that had taken many lives had a way of retaining the scent of blood, and Falcon's sword was one such weapon. Rock found himself nearly at a loss for words, his suspicions confirmed.

"...Do you always use this sword to kill people?"

"It is so. It is a fearsome demon blade forged from the hatred of the master smith Tanaka San. Its name is Izayoi Edge Number 108."

Rock realized once again just how fearsome the man in front of him was. He'd somehow managed to kill people with a sword made of duralumin.

"The hatred held within its edge causes even the slightest of cuts to rupture mercilessly into gaping wounds. When I was yet a novice, I was unable to tame such dread power and destroyed 107 of its brethren."

To Rock it sounded like Falcon had just beaten people to death instead of cutting them down, the "gaping wounds" caused by his sheer strength, but he no longer had the will to even attempt correcting the misunderstanding. And as for the master smith who'd somehow mustered the hatred to imbue no less than one hundred and eight blades with demonic rage, well, Rock reflected there could be worse outlets for that sort of thing.

"So, you're going to take this sword and beat- err, I mean, *cut down* Mister Chang?"

"Chang's lair is heavily guarded. It will be impossible to bring the Izayoi Edge Number 108. Therefore, I must use *genwaku no jutsu*²⁶ to infiltrate his fortress."

"Ge, genwaku no jutsu?"

"I have heard you called Rock, but I know that is not your real name. Would you honor me by revealing it?"

Rock floundered for a moment, taken off guard by the sudden question, and replied before he could even think the matter over properly.

"Rokuro... It's Okajima Rokuro. But why?"

"Rokuro-dono. I will take on your face and your name to destroy the evil of Chang Wai-San."

"*What?*"

Shadow Falcon raised one hand calmly, as though to alleviate Rock's fears.

"It will only be a fleeting moment. I promise you that I will not tarnish your reputation. I have merely observed from your conversations on the boat that you are in close relations with Chang Wai-San. Therefore, if I transform into you and approach Chang, I will be able to fool his guards. All I ask of you is to stay here until my mission is complete."

"..."

So this was what Falcon had meant by "acquiesce to my requests." But it wasn't really like he could refuse now.

Rock couldn't be sure of just how much of a threat this strange man would pose to Chang and the Triad, but the matter was out of his hands. He could only hope that Chang wouldn't let his guard down.

"You're going to transform into me? How?"

²⁶ 幻惑の術: The illusory arts of the Orient, which fray the boundary between reality and lies.

"At the pinnacle of the ninja arts, falsehoods become truths, and reality becomes a lie. The ninja technique *utsushimi no jutsu*²⁷ will make it easy to assume your visage."

With no further delay, Shadow Falcon immediately began taking out clothes and makeup in preparation.

...One hour later.

The ninja observed his face in the mirror and nodded in satisfaction.

"Perfect."

"..."

Rock couldn't find it in himself to say anything in reply.

²⁷映し身の術: Ninja art of masking oneself in the identity of another.



Chapter 5

Jake opened his eyes and welcomed the morning, bright eyed and bushy tailed, the chatter of the market outside his room in Charkuwan Street's Tochaina Hotel spilling in through the thin walls.

The hotel was little more than a rundown shack made of wood; the very thought of comparing it to the Sankan Palace Hotel at which he'd stayed when working for the redheaded woman was nothing less than preposterous. The hard, funky smelling mattress and the lukewarm shower water would normally have been hard for Jake to stand, but this morning, at least, things didn't seem so bad.

No matter how tempting the pay might be, a contract that wasn't what it seemed naturally carried with it a large amount of stress. Free from those stifling confines, Jake felt as though he'd been born again.

His days of being moved back and forth over the board by some unknown chessmaster were over. Starting today, Jake would once again live his life according to his own decisions and plans.

For starters, he needed to learn more about Roanapur. Only the Lagoon's crew knew what Jake looked like, so even if the Triad had put out a bounty on his head, all they'd have was a rough sketch of him at best. He just needed to pay a little attention to his appearance and he'd have little trouble walking the streets.

In places like Roanapur, where life was cheap, there were always gunmen who were willing to take cheap jobs, confident in the false knowledge that they'd live forever. With plenty of cannon fodder at his side, Jake would be more than prepared to take on Two Hand once more.

This time he would set up a more careful plan to hunt that hot pussy. He'd have to back her into a corner, so that she had no choice but to listen to him. Even then, though, he had his doubts as to whether she'd agree to negotiate.

In the worst case, he'd have to settle for a picture of her corpse as always. But if he wanted to satisfy his faithful fans after all the trouble he'd gone to to introduce Revy, he'd probably have to hire some sickos and record some kind of necrophilia event.

Now to see how his visitors had reacted to his post about Revy while he slept.

Jake absently shoveled his breakfast down and opened up his laptop, checking his blog. The top page loaded and he gave a low whistle in surprise, noting how much the access counter had leaped upward overnight. Far more than he'd expected.

He'd gotten more hits during the night than he had just after he updated, a strange occurrence. Maybe word of mouth had spread farther than he'd thought?

"...Huh?"

Suddenly, a strange sense of unease took hold of him.

The calendar on his blog said that his latest update had been made today. He thought for a second that it might be broken, but a quick glance at the newest post confirmed that it wasn't mistaken.

There was a new post, dated at two in the morning... a post that even Jake, the site's owner, had no memory of making.

"The hell is- *what the fuck?!*" Jake cried out loud as the post loaded, unable to hold in his surprise.

The first thing that caught his eye was the erotic picture that dominated his screen. A beautiful woman, scantily clad in black leather, gazed seductively at the camera, a sadistic grin on her face as she licked her lips, a whip clenched in her hands.

And lying on the ground beneath her, mercilessly transfixed by the pressure of her pin heel boots, was a grossly obese man who looked to be in his mid-thirties, disgusting flabs of fat hanging loose all over his body.

The woman... was Revy. There was no doubt about it. Her natural wild beauty was at full bloom, accentuated even more by her finely done makeup. Everything about her, from the way she held her body to the look on her face, would have put a seasoned SM mistress to shame. This was simply her natural talent on display.

But who was the masochistic fatass under her?

He scrolled downward, and discovered there were more images. Mistress Revy was in her element, utilizing all the tools at her disposal, from a cat o' nine to a riding crop to candles to good old fashioned spanking. The fat man drooled helplessly, the ball gag in his mouth holding it open as he was bound by ropes, a pair of handcuffs, and even a leather harness. And he was holding something in his hands... a silver automatic pistol, plated with chrome. It looked almost exactly like the UC Custom that was holstered on Jake's shoulder.

That was when Jake finally noticed the text that had been inserted in between the images.

-Hello, it's me, Ultimate Cool J. I have something very important to tell you all today.



I've been looking for something ultimately cool to do all my life, and tonight, I finally found it.

What is it, you ask? It's being true to myself. I decided to show my fat ass to all of my visitors. My new mistress, the Two Hand Queen, showed me the way. Every time she insulted me, every time she stepped on me, every time she whipped me, I could feel a layer of the lies I'd piled on myself coming loose to reveal the real me. It felt *so good...*

I'm done with Ultimate and Cool now. UCJ's born again. From now on, I'm Ugly Coward J. Goodbye UCJ, hello UCJ. I'm going to revel in my life now by squealing like a pig every night, enjoying the humiliation and pain my mistress gives me.

I'm showing you what I look like as a present to celebrate my new birthday. I hope I can make lots of new friends here. Your internet idol, UCJ.

The post finished with one last picture of Revy giving the camera a sunny smile as she shoved the UC Custom's barrel deep into the fat man's asshole.

"...Wuh... wha..."

Jake could only sit and stare, pressing the refresh button on his browser over and over, hoping beyond hope that his website would go back to normal.

But no matter how many times he pressed F5, the contents of the new Deadly Biz stared him coldly in the face. It took Jake a while to dredge up some measure of calm, and only then did he realize that someone must have taken control of his site.

"How the hell..."

Rage and terror looped through Jake's head in equal measure, only serving to confuse him even more. This was clearly cyber terror. The work of some terrible hacker, a trap set by someone who had surely grown envious of Jake's popularity.

He hastily turned on his FTP software to delete the offensive post, but the words **ACCESS DENIED** blocked his way. Another error message swiftly followed. **INCORRECT PASSWORD.**

"Fuck... *Fuck!!*"

He'd been locked out. Jake no longer had any power over his own site. If he didn't do something fast, his reputation would be destroyed by some malicious, unknown third party.

He had to warn his faithful fans. He had to tell them not to be deceived, to see the truth. He clicked the link to the guestbook, intending to log in there and explain the situation.

...Sure enough, the guestbook was already swarming with new replies.

>Techichi: holy shit DUDE is that fatass really UCJ i think I threw up in my mouth a little

>Savage-X: Probably. See, he's even holding the UC Custom. I don't know what to say. And yeah, I feel a bit sick too thinking about how I was fooled by this fat fuck.

>Zastava: I cnat beleiv he called himself ultimit and cool rofl!! Man I feel sorry 4 teh guys who were kildd bye him

>Sgt.Frog: I just threw away all the shit I bought from this site. How the hell am I supposed to show my face at the firing range now?

Shit. His fans were being totally hoodwinked. It was clear that appearing now as UCJ would only fan the flames.

Chomping on his nails in anxiety, Jake decided that he had no choice but to leave a post pretending to be someone else. Sockpuppeting was all he could do to try and salvage the situation.

>IloveJ: Holy shit you guys are dumb. Can't you see this is just a troll? It's obviously someone trying to frame J. You have to believe in him now more than ever. You call yourselves fans?

Jake clicked submit, hoping to turn the tide in his favor with the relatively benign post. But just minutes after the post went up, a tsunami of other posts appeared in reply.

>Madidi: herp derp trollolol

>bigdoop: fan? lol wut

>Electric-Com: typical Jtard, you can tell he has a model UC Custom himself at home and he's trying to save face on an anonymous message board

"Shit..."

But he couldn't back down. If he turned tail here, there'd be no going back. Jake threw up another post, heavy droplets of sweat beading his forehead.

>IloveJ: This is some sort of conspiracy. You can even tell it's not him, the writing style is totally different. You guys are all getting trolled.

>Wzombie: a conspiracy??? ROFL i bet u think rosavelt knew pearl harbor was gunna b bombed and teh apoloo 13 never went 2 the moon ROFL

>FKKmaster: I dunno, I think J's pretty damn sexy. I'm looking forward to how this blog is gonna develop from now on. I mean, it's gonna be pretty hard to top that.
>Jason13: a fatass is fine too
>spookydog: lets fuck ucj ill b waiting 4 u at teh nice guy club at tifanas 2nite lets see who the real ugly coward is
>Swaggar: Two Hand Queen is mai waifu :3
>masamichi: nude shoop up on the uploader bros
>xXsteelCommanderXx: FUCK YEAH MASAMICHI

"..."

The conversation continued on a completely different track, heedless of J's desperate pleas. Every time he refreshed, more text appeared, filling up the browser window.

Every single post from back when Jake's blog was still his had already been pushed off the guestbook's front page; one would have to go searching through the backlog to find them.

Jake sat with his hands still on the keyboard, unable to move, unable to type. People were accessing his site from all over the world. Posts were flying in, one after another, each one with a new insult. Everything he could see was made to ridicule, to hate, to make fun of UCJ.

To these people, the man known as J was that masochistic sweaty fatass. The character that J had so painstakingly cultivated had been utterly destroyed in a single night's work.

"I..." Jake said numbly, still pressing the refresh button. He couldn't think of anything else to do.

Some time passed, the page reloading again and again. The top post had been changed again, to show an animated .gif of the fat man. He waved his ponderous behind from side to side, his mouth opening and closing in silent squeals.

Whoever had taken away his access privileges was still updating the site. The guestbook, presented with fresh meat, immediately flared up into an even greater flurry of activity, and Deadly Biz's hit counter kept rising and rising.

"...I'm..."

Jake rose shakily, staggered over to the bathroom sink, and stared at his reflection in the mirror.

Von Zipper Brooklyn shades sat atop the New Era BB cap he wore, and thick silver earrings decorated his ears. All of the trinkets had been purchased to keep up with the latest trends, the hottest fashions. He'd needed them to keep up his persona, the character of Ultimate Cool J. But now J didn't exist anymore. His existence had been twisted by some unseen menace, transformed into an ugly, cowardly J. His site had been taken over, but the crime wasn't theft. It

was *murder*. A piece of fiction had come along and *killed* someone whose body was made of text, whose soul was made of online reputation.

Jake took off the sunglasses and the cap that were now just the belongings of a dead man, and looked again into the mirror.

Who was the man staring back? *Jake himself couldn't say for certain*. All the Ultimate Cool J fans of the world would have *not the slightest idea who the man in the mirror was*. All they knew was the ugly, cowardly J. If he wanted to close the gap between the fiction they knew and the reality before him, he would have to fit himself with a ball gag and a blindfold and start crawling on his hands and knees.

The sounds of Charkuwan Street outside the window sounded like they were coming from another planet. Even the mirror seemed like it was miles away, as did his laptop and the walls around him. Jake realized that *there was no place for him there anymore*.

"No way... I'm... a lie...?"

Jake staggered out of his room, his eyes focused on nothing as he muttered strangely to himself. *He couldn't stay in this empty place any longer*. He needed to find someplace crowded, someplace louder. He needed sound. He needed sights. He needed something to wrap around himself so that he could feel.

He walked aimlessly through the market, the hot sun burning his skin.

Countless faces passed him by. Faces. Faces... But none of them turned to look at Jake. None of them knew who he was. All of them were too busy living their own lives to give Jake a second glance, though he was standing right in front of them.

They only saw him as a nuisance who was in the way, and accordingly they walked around him without looking him in the eyes. As though he were a stray dog. No, worse, a stone in the middle of the street.

Maybe if he shouted, "I'm UCJ!" then they would turn around to look at him.

They would look at him with scornful, condemning eyes. They would whisper amongst themselves that *he was that infamous ugly, cowardly, masochistic fatass*.

What the hell have I been doing till now?

What am I doing here?

He took another step forward, hoping that doing so would reveal some sort of answer, and then took another, and another. He didn't look to see where he was going, his gaze firmly fixed on his own shoes as he searched for an answer that didn't exist.

The sun burned his back. The sweat felt greasy on his skin. But even those felt like they were someone else's problems. Did he really exist here? How could he be sure? Nobody would vouch for his existence. Nobody would tell him where to go now that his self had been taken away.

Jake was so lost in his own thoughts that he soon forgot to look where he was going. Suddenly realizing that the sound of busy city life had faded away into unnerving silence, Jake looked up and realized he was utterly alone.

He must have trudged out of downtown, past the slums, all the way out of the city. He was standing in a place where no human being had stood for a long time.

Crosses and tombstones surrounded him.

The cemetery was rundown and overgrown with weeds, making it clear that it had been abandoned quite some time ago. Every name on every grave had been eroded away by harsh nature, leaving them looking forlorn, like unmarked tombs.

"Heh. I gotta say you've got a knack for choosin' places."

The voice that came from behind him made Jake jump and turn around.

She stood in a ray of sunlight, her black shadow stark against the ground as though she were a fragment of reality itself, come to tear apart the nightmare he'd found himself in.

"Yup, this is just the sorta place to have a good showdown. Ya finally live up to yer name, eh, Ultimate Cool?"

At first, Jake himself couldn't understand why she was standing there.

She must have seen him walking through the streets and followed him until he stopped. But that wasn't what concerned him.

What he honestly couldn't understand was why she had followed him when the person once known as UCJ no longer existed.

But even his confused thoughts finally came to a conclusion, one that was utterly natural to him. To Revy, Jake was *still the same person he had been yesterday*. An enemy to be fought, for the sake of her pride. The sort of archenemy with whom communication could only be achieved in the form of hot lead.

That can't be. But Jake had no way to express that thought to Revy. Any attempt to explain that the gunslinger who had had a shootout with her just yesterday was dead would be met with an utter lack of comprehension. Words no longer had any meaning... In that sense, the woman standing before him was no different from a shark or a great hunting cat.

To Jake, Revy's pitch black shadow looked like a bottomless pit leading straight to Hell. That was how fearsome he found her now, standing unflinching in the blinding morning sunlight.

"Are you... are you going to kill me?" Jake managed, his voice cracked with stress.

"Dunno. That's up to you. If ya just keep standin' there pissin' yer goddamn pants then yeah, probably. But..."

Revy spun her Cutlass around her trigger finger idly, her voice as calm as that of someone discussing the weather.

"But, who knows? I might be the one to bite it. You still have your gun on you, doncha? I ain't stupid. I know I'm not immortal. One decent hit from that .45 caliber and it'd be sayonara for me. Then you'd be the one left standin'."

"..."

She was right. The gun that Jake had so lovingly customized was indeed still snug in its hidden holster in Jake's clothes. But to the Jake of now, even the thought of drawing it and firing was so utterly foreign that it was hard to imagine.

How could she tell him to do something so terrifying? It wasn't like he could brag to anyone about shooting someone with that gun...

"Fine, I'll give you a reward for pickin' a decent spot. Let's play a game."

Revy grinned a predator's grin and shoved her pistol back into its holster instead of pointing it at Jake. But the hammer was still cocked, the safety left undone.

"...There. *You can draw first.* Any time, baby."

Jake realized what she meant and froze on the spot.

She meant to *duel him*. Like a bad western. Like kids would duel with toy guns. She was offering a bet with their lives on the line, the survivor to be decided solely based on the speed of the draw.

"Wha, what... Why're you doing this?! What're you thinking?!"

To Jake, her offer was, in a sense, even crueler than if she had shot him dead right then and there. She was forcing him to *fight*, even after everything—his pride and his will—had been obliterated. It was as though she was asking him to pull down the switch of his own electric chair. She was asking him to tie the knot of his own noose and fix it to the gallows.

"Why're you doing this?! What sort of meaning could this have? Why're you *so determined to kill me even if it means you might die yourself?!'*"

"Hey, hey. Don't disappoint me, asshole. You're ruining the goddamn mood here."

Revy dismissed Jake's hysterics with a snort, her eyes going dead black.

"What the fuck is *meaning*, anyway? Does anything in your life have *meaning*, except drawin' your gun and shooting? You eat and shit and sleep and wake up, and then you go and get fuckin' drunk and fuck some whore and *then what?* Looks like a busy schedule to me. Where the hell wouldja fit somethin' big an' fancy like *meaning* in there? Dipshit. If life has any meaning, the only time you get to feel it is when *you live through something that you know shoulda killed you.*"

Jake stood rooted to the spot, unable to reply, staring dumbly at the smiling reaper.

"We're gunslingers, ain't we? We don't have a chance to weigh our cheap ass lives except times like this. So here's what I'm sayin'. I'm gonna *give your life meaning*. Try an' stand on the line between life and death. It'll be like takin' a hit of speed, only a million times better, baby."

She was playing with him. She wasn't a pussy cat. She wasn't an animal at all. She was something worse. No animal would *kill purely for pleasure*.

Jake looked around. There was nobody in the vicinity to witness their duel. No songs would be sung of valor or honor in this place. Nobody would ever speak of this duel. Losing his life in a place like this would truly be a return to nothing. He would vanish without a trace, remembered by no one.

"...No... I don't wanna..." Jake sobbed, terrified by the nameless graves surrounding him.

"...I... I don't wanna die here... Nobody's gonna remember me... There'll be nothing left of me! Nothing!"

"Yeah. Nothin'," Revy said, her voice ringing hollowly. It sounded like she was talking for the faceless tombs.

"If you're scared of that, then *shout*. Use that gun to tell the fuckin' world that you're here. That's how gunslingers work. You shoot someone else and keep on living. Those're the only moments in our goddamn lives that have any meaning."

"...Ah."

Now, finally, Jake could feel the weight of the holster resting against his shoulder.

Perhaps the soul of iron there carried far more weight than any formless life ever could.

"Jake, ya might be a fucktard, but you're not bad with a gun. I gotta admit that trick you pulled on the Lagoon was pretty neat, and yesterday you managed to stay alive against me 'till that fuckin' ninja came to bail out your ass. *Your gun's not worthless.* Here, in this godforsaken city, it's the most valuable thing you have. It's worth a hell of a lot more attention than your online image as some ultimate cool motherfucker, I can tell you that."

Revy's right hand hovered in midair like a snake coiled to strike, waiting for the crucial moment to draw. With her left hand, she beckoned to Jake.

"Now, let's dance, baby. I'll teach you how to *really live. Welcome to Roanapur.*"

Jake's consciousness, which had been scattered to the four winds, came together at last. He could think again.

His skills with a gun... Right. He could remember thinking he'd never lose to anyone in a gunfight.

He'd thought *that alone would be enough to make him a star.* How could he have forgotten? It had been *all he had* in the beginning.

He hadn't lost anything at all.

There were no anonymous fans screaming his name, no hit counter to gauge his popularity.

But... He had a hand to grasp a gun with, fingers to pull the trigger with, *here and now.* He hadn't forgotten the gun skills that he'd so painstakingly acquired.

Yes. He'd tell them. He'd show them. Not anyone in particular. He would direct his wild cry at the empty world around him, telling it that he was the greatest gunman alive.

"Revy..."

Jake stared down the enemy before him, concentrating everything he had on her every movement. He took in the rhythm of her breath, the direction of her gaze, the faults in her concentration. He searched for the timing that would allow him to bypass her instinctual reaction, the moment where drawing first would ensure certain victory.

Only one voice would cry out into the night. The other would fall silent, face down on the cold earth.

His hand was on the switch of the electric chair. He could feel the fibers of the hangman's noose in his hands.

The balance of his forearm concentrated solely on reigning in recoil. His arm muscles existed only for one blindingly fast draw. Two eyes, open wide, saw only their target... His entire body came into play for this one moment.

Electricity ran up his spine. His heart pounded in his chest. He couldn't think anymore.

Had there ever been a moment like this, when he could feel his own life so clearly?

His soul became part of his gun and spoke to him of the moment of fate. *Now is the time*, it told him.

Without hesitation or fear, Jake moved his hand toward the grip of his gun. In that very instant Jake lived his entire life, as though all the time he'd wasted had been just for that moment.

The sound of a gunshot echoed in the hot air.
Jake allowed his thoughts to wander as the shock traveled through his body, and the last echoes of the shot faded away.

The sound of a 9mm firing was too cold and unfriendly for his tastes.

He preferred the heavy, powerful sound of a .45 caliber...

...Adios, pistolero. That last look on your face wasn't bad...

He could hear someone talking to him as he sank into the darkness.

The voice was husky, bringing to mind many nights of cigarettes and booze. A sexy voice.

Who was it? He couldn't think anymore. He didn't know.

But he was sure that just the sound of that voice was enough to make him fall in love. He was certain that it belonged to a really cute girl.

Shadow Falcon stopped in front of the demon fortress, Rehe Industries, Inc., and stared up at the windows of the highest floor, where the vile Chang Wai-San hid and plotted his evil machinations.

His battle was finally nearing its end. But especially now, with the goal in sight, he knew that the slightest mistake could spell instant death. Yet it would also be folly to reveal his state of heightened alert.

Right now, he was no longer a formless shadow lurking in the inky darkness. He had become *Rokuro Okajima*, and he stood revealed in the open. He now had to assume the gentle and intelligent Japanese man's personality and mannerisms in their entirety, deceiving everyone he might chance to meet.

My will, take form, Shadow Falcon recited under his breath as he slowly stepped into the lobby, the arcane chant exerting its power over his body.

In an instant he took in the number of people in the lobby, as well as their positions. Two uniformed security guards stood in plain sight. There were three bodyguards in black suits seated on the lobby sofa, and from the way the two women at the counter held their bodies he could tell that they, too, possessed hidden weapons. The pair of security cameras on the ceiling had been cunningly installed to cover one another's blind spots.

Truly an impenetrable perimeter. But Shadow Falcon's disguise was beyond perfect. Indeed, the moment they caught sight of him, every person in the lobby immediately smiled in his direction. Obviously the response one would show to a trusted friend.

Having confirmed that his disguise worked, Falcon proceeded to the next obstacle standing in his way: the receptionists. He would have to exert his greatest powers of suggestion to convince the women that his unscheduled visit was strictly natural.

"Excuse me. I am Rokuro Okajima desu. Sorry, very sorry."

Assuming the basic position of all Japanese—bowing from the waist continuously as he walked forward—Shadow Falcon closed in on the receptionists at the counter. But before he could even bring his more advanced techniques to bear, the women smiled warmly at him.

"Ah, of course. Mister Chang is waiting in his office. Take the elevator inside and go to the highest floor."

They allowed him to enter without even asking after the purpose of his visit, their voices full of friendly cheer.

"...Thank you very much, sorry, very sorry," Shadow Falcon said, advancing as naturally as he could toward the elevator. Inside, though, he was shocked. He had correctly predicted that

Master Rokuro was a friend of Chang Wai-San, but to think that they were so close that he would be able to enter Chang's lair just by assuming his face! It seemed that Master Rokuro was treated no differently from family within the Triad. Verily, the natural virtue of the Japanese was an amazing thing.

...Unknown to Falcon, Chang had personally given an order to everyone working in the building that day. He had told them that if by chance a blatantly suspicious individual were to appear, they were to ask no questions and immediately direct him straight to Chang's office. The man working the security cameras had caught sight of Falcon standing in front of the building and had immediately contacted the lobby, informing them that the blatantly suspicious individual had indeed made his appearance.

Observing how everyone in the lobby burst into merry laughter just before the elevator doors closed, Falcon was once again awed by Master Rokuro's popularity. It hurt him deeply to use such a universally loved individual for a shadow operation, but the way of a ninja was harsh and fraught with such necessary sacrifices. Falcon had no choice but to become a demon himself, until the lord of darkness Chang Wai-San was vanquished.

The elevator carried Shadow Falcon up as he brooded heavily on these dire thoughts, finally arriving at the top floor. It was bare save the CEO's office and two meeting rooms, and instead of a proper hallway there was merely an elevator landing.

The strangely wide interior appeared to have constructed so a barricade could be constructed in case of an emergency. Five bodyguards armed with fearsome submachine guns stood guarding Chang's office, but the moment they clapped eyes on Falcon...

"Oh, hi, Rock... *Pfffft!*"

...They greeted him like a brother.

"Excuse me, I am sorry, very sorry, excuse me, I am Rokuro desu," Falcon repeated, bowing as he approached the office. One of the black-suited guards turned and pressed the intercom, his voice light with good humor.

"Da Ge, uh, Mister Rokuro is he, he, hahaha, here to see you. Ahahaha!"

"Of course. Send him right in."

Chang Wai-San's voice carried not the slightest hint of suspicion. And at last, the final barrier was laid open before Shadow Falcon.

Everything about the office, from the furniture to the lights, had obviously been chosen from the most expensive stores. Yet, the atmosphere was not gaudy in the slightest, every factor in the room coming together to form a perfect harmony.

A handsome man sat on a sofa positioned so that he could look down on the cityscape of Roanapur, a whiskey glass in his hand. It was none other than Chang Wai-San himself.

Falcon could feel the dignity and force of personality practically rolling off of the man, even though he was at rest. Truly, he could see how such a person had come to stand at the top of this formidable organization.

"Excuse me, I am Rokuro desu. I am very sorry, very sorry..."

Casting away all doubt, Falcon shuffled in, subtly surveying his surroundings. There were no hidden guards.

The door shut behind him. It was a closed room now. There could be no better chance to assassinate Chang. All he had to do was strike Chang down in one decisive blow, before he could even draw a breath to scream and alert the bodyguards outside, and then his mission would be complete.

Chang raised his glass in salute, cheerily watching Falcon as the shadow warrior carefully moved forward.

"Welcome, Rock... Or, no. Perhaps I should I say, *welcome, warrior of the Kouga Death Shadow.*"

"...Gah?!"

Shock ran through him. But even then, Falcon did not let his body betray him, leaping backward from the unknown threat. He retrieved the shuriken from its hiding place in his belt buckle and held it ready.

Even as his body moved, Falcon's mind was awl with confused questions. How had Chang seen straight through his flawless disguise, which had so perfectly fooled the receptionists and the hardened bodyguards?

None of this inner turmoil showed on his face. But Chang seemed to read his very thoughts, laughing calmly as he answered Falcon's unspoken question.

"You have done well to come this far. But alas, Shadow Falcon... No matter how well a ninja may disguise himself, *he cannot fool another ninja.*"

"What?!"

Falcon was unable to hold the exclamation back, such was his surprise.

"Who... what are you?! How do you know this one's shadow name?!"

"Ha, ha, ha. A hard question to answer, but I will do so nonetheless. You see, I am a man of many faces."

Chang removed his sunglasses, a mysterious smile gracing his features.

"To some, I am known as Mike Chang, CEO of Rehe Industries, Inc. To others, I am the Pak Tsz Sin of the Triad, Chang Wai-San. But in truth, I am..."

With grave ceremony, Chang drew something forth from an inside pocket. When he saw the small obsidian box glimmering softly in the sunlight, the greatest shock yet seized Shadow Falcon's mind and body.

"A... a MASTER Seal Case?! Then... then you are...?!"

"It is so. I am a Master Ninja of the Kouga Death Shadow Style. There are those who speak of this one in hushed whispers as Shadow Dragon."

Even Falcon had only seen a MASTER Seal Case in the pages of the OMC catalog, never in person. It was an ultra rare item, given only to those who had mastered every dan and collected every ninja item, even the limited edition ones. Now that many of the most arcane relics were sold out, it was a thing of fantasy, considered impossible to obtain.

Trembling in the face of such a dread presence, Shadow Falcon immediately dropped his weapon and prostrated himself, touching his forehead to the floor.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would meet a Master Ninja in such a fashion... I submit myself to your tender mercies, for I have committed countless discourtesies against you. If only I had known...!"

"Mmm. It is of no consequence. I know this to be the guidance of our honored forefather, Kemuma Ki²⁸."

Chang Wai-San... No, *Shadow Dragon* gathered his hands together as he gravely uttered the name of the Death Shadow style's founding grandmaster. Even as he quivered with gratitude at the Master Ninja's forgiveness, Falcon could not help but ask a question.

"Bu... but, Master, why did you not reveal your identity sooner? I heard that you were a lord of darkness, and unwittingly thought to commit such gross transgressions against your person..."

"Mmm. I knew, of course, that you were being used by a great and evil conspiracy that aimed to destroy the Death Shadow from within. But I judged that this, too, was a trial that had to be faced alone by one who walked the path of the shadow. Now that I face you here, having

²⁸ From Kemumaki Kemuzou, the antagonist of the 1960s manga *Ninja Hattori-kun*.

observed your skills as you exerted them to their utmost, I can see how far you have progressed in the ways of the shinobi."

"Such all-encompassing compassion..."

Overwhelmed by the generosity of the Master Ninja, who had deliberately put himself in harm's way in order to hone Falcon's skills, Shadow Falcon soaked the carpet with his tears. Standing above him, Shadow Dragon nodded magnanimously.

"But I see that it was well worth it to put myself in danger. You have come to stand before me, having cunningly used the ninja arts to circumvent all obstacles. Now... Rise, Shadow Falcon. Rise, and receive this."

Falcon raised his head and was immediately transfixed by the sight of the scroll held in the Master Ninja's hand.

"Is that... a Scroll of License?!"

"I bestow this upon you by evidence of the skills you have showed to me on this day. I, Master Ninja Shadow Dragon, hereby grant you the title of Shadow Greater Ninja."

"Ma, Master!"

Shadow Falcon gently took the scroll from the revered elder, his hands shaking with emotion. The Scroll of License was also a super rare item—not quite as prestigious as the MASTER Seal Case, but nevertheless extremely hard to obtain. To Falcon, it felt as though his countless days of grueling training were now finally being rewarded.

"Shadow Falcon, I charge you with a new mission. Hurry across the sea, to Hong Kong, and there pledge yourself into the service of my own master, Grandmaster Zhuang Dai-Long. There, under my his guidance, you will punish new evils."

"As you will, so shall it be!"

Falcon nodded sedately, but his mind was already flying across the ocean.

Hong Kong... Oh, Hong Kong!

There, within that legendary unsleeping city, his ninja path would continue ever onward. The darkness of Kowloon's Walled City beckoned. Junks floated on the water, their sails flapping lazily in the morning wind. Did four thousand years of Oriental mystery await him there? Or perhaps a vast conspiracy revolving around the transfer of sovereignty?

No matter what hardships awaited him, the blade (刃) of his heart (心) would cut down all enemies who stood before him, and the heart (心) of his blade (刃) would pierce through lies to discover truth.

What had he to fear? It was his fate to live in the darkness, and to cloak himself in it.

Now, holding the fearsome arts of the ninja in your breast... Go, Shadow Falcon!

Fight, Shadow Falcon!

"...and so, I sent a promising young man to serve you. He requires a bit of knowhow to handle properly, but I can vouch for his skill as an assassin."

The moment that Shadow Falcon exited his office, Chang immediately dialed the Triad's Shan Chu²⁹, Zhuang Dai-Long, and filled him in on the situation.

"The only weakness that comes to mind is... Ah, never send him on a mission that might require him to disguise himself. And he is easily deceived, so that might need some work... Yes, he's already on his way, so all you need to do is receive him... No, no the pleasure is all mine, Lung Tao³⁰. Yes. Of course. Goodbye."

Chang set down the receiver and turned to Biu Yu-Yun, who was practically chomping at the bit with curiosity.

"...Da Ge, can you really send him there in good faith?"

"Hmm? Well, I couldn't just let such an amusing fellow go, could I? Shenhua's probably going to be out for his blood, though, so I think it would be a good idea to let him lay low in Hong Kong until she calms down."

Chang's taste in subordinates was often unpredictable, even whimsical, and his right hand Biu was constantly worrying over his boss's capricious impulses. Still, Chang had never been wrong, so it wasn't exactly like he could properly protest.

"But what was he, exactly?"

"Mmm, I suppose you could call him one of our best customers."

"Come again?"

²⁹山主 (mountain master). Leader of a Triad.

³⁰龍頭 (dragon head). Similar in meaning to Shan Chu.

Chang opened a drawer in his desk and drew forth a booklet, handing it to Biu. It was the same phony OMC ninjutsu pamphlet that Falcon had had, but unlike Shadow Falcon's cherished treasure, which had been worn from constant use, this one was almost brand new. Chang had only flipped through it once a few hours ago.

"You see, OMC is one of the businesses managed by our New York branch. Usually they sell things like mummy powder and Qing Dynasty elixirs, but back when kung fu was booming thanks to Bruce Lee, they added martial arts manuals to the catalog and made a killing. Naturally, they did it again with the ninja boom just a while ago. I admit it took me a while to remember, myself."

Biu frowned as he skimmed the booklet, taken aback at the preposterous training methods inscribed inside.

"So I gave the customer records a look, and what do you know, we had a winner. Some fool had bought a hundred and eight fake swords under the name Shadow Falcon. The actual manufacturing goes on in Malaysia, so it only took a night when I told them I needed some items right away, and... Well, the rest is what you just saw. Hah, Master Ninja, hmm? Maybe I'll add it to my repertoire of nicknames."

"Don't even think about it," Biu said respectfully, tossing the booklet onto Chang's desk.

"...Really, though. What would the martial artists of the world think if they knew that someone could become a master assassin by following the instructions in this joke of a manual?"

"I suppose it just goes to show that training isn't really about what you do, but instead the effort you put into it. Manuals don't hold all the answers. Maybe you can see the truth even when faced with lies or irrationality, as long as you know how to look at them."

Biu turned the cheaply manufactured plastic seal case over in his hands and sighed.

"...You speak of things beyond my knowledge, Da Ge."

"Oh? Don't you think what we do is pretty similar? Good and evil are all in the eye of the beholder, after all. People who don't understand that kind of thing look at us and talk about the *mysteries of the Orient*. Hilarious, isn't it? I suppose it's only natural that we Chinese hold power over the dark places of the world."

Chang stretched leisurely as though he'd just finished a difficult task and promptly set about pondering his next problem.

"Let's see... Add the one that Revy said she took care of this morning, and we've only got one or two rats left scurrying around."

"The Lagoon's reputation is in good standing again, so isn't it about time we took up the hunt ourselves?"

"Hmm... Maybe, maybe not," Chang said pensively, staring out the window at the cityscape of Roanapur.

"...Perhaps someone will bring this play to its end before we do."

Stan's consciousness was lost in a maze of confused memories.

He held a brand new Dragunov in his hands. He'd lost his old one, but someone had provided him with a replacement. There was nothing to provide shelter from the sunlight on the roof of the five floor apartment where he stood. The direct rays of sunlight on his back and the heat reflected off the concrete floor on his belly made him feel like a turkey shoved onto a grill.

He held the rifle in his hands and waited. He'd lost count of how many times he'd done this over the years. Sometimes he even thought it was the only thing he'd ever done. He had waited like this in the shadows of craggy rocks, behind billboards, feeling the sun sear his skin. He had done this many, many times.

What day was it, with its blindingly bright blue sky? What was the name of the city he saw, the heat rising from it making the sky waver?

He didn't understand how time worked any longer. Was he aiming with the rifle now, or was he remembering a time long ago when he had held a rifle and aimed it? His memories encroached on the present, mixing with it in his consciousness.

Within Stan's heroin-addled brain, the past, the present, and fantasy all came together in equal parts.

It felt like if he slipped he would fall into the chaos, never to return... But the hard feeling of the stock against his body provided a firm anchor.

Don't be tempted. Don't look at it. Concentrate on what you have to do. The same thing I have always done. Focus on the target, and gauge the timing to pull the trigger.

He had to kill a man named Chang Wai-San. At noon, the target would exit a car that would park at the corner of Hamipong Street, and walk into the Golden Swinging Nightclub. He would have approximately ten seconds to sight the target and fire... It would be more than enough.

Who was Chang? Perhaps he was a leader of the Mujahideen. Maybe a Pashtun.

Perhaps such a man didn't exist at all, and he was dreaming that he was on an imaginary mission. It didn't matter anymore. What mattered was that he completed the mission. That was all.

He *would* complete the mission. He would present the evidence to what remained of his pride. And with his head held high he would report to Kapitan Pavlovena. Mission complete, he would say.

...we will remove you by force...

A voice from the depths of his memories. It belonged to the woman with only half a face. Fry Face, Balalaika...

No, that wasn't a memory. It was a hallucination. Stan nodded to himself and laughed dryly. It was but a nightmare, inadvertently brought on by his longing to see the Kapitan. He knew for certain that a woman like her would never fall so far as to become a mobster.

For Stan could see the glory of Kapitan Pavlovena in his mind's eye, just as clearly as he could remember Balalaika.

He could see her receiving an Order of Suvorov, first class, for her courage and dedication. He could see her marching through the Red Square, her head held high.

The Kapitan recited a short prayer for all of their comrades who had not lived to see that glorious day in front of Lenin's grave. And all who were gathered there listened, and shed mournful tears for their friends, who had fallen in a faraway land...

Had Stan truly seen such a thing? He wasn't certain, just as he couldn't be sure that the woman known as Balalaika existed. It was impossible for Stan to tell the difference between reality and delusion anymore.

That was why it was folly to attempt it. "There was only a matter of which hallucination he would believe in... and naturally, Stan hadn't the slightest intention of acknowledging an illusion which would besmirch his hero's name.

Soon, the minute and hour hands on his wristwatch would meet. Pushing his crazed delusions back into the sea of chaos inside him, Stan peered into the scope of his Dragunov. He set it to 4x zoom, focused on Hamipong Street, which lay 800 meters away, and asked a question to the wind.

He called the devil's wind into his head as it lay against the stock, as he had so many times before in the past.

Slowly, the image of his homeland rose to the forefront of his mind, returning from beyond the abyss of his memories. The world turned monochrome, everything freezing into harsh shades of silvery white.

Stan was young again, and as he struggled to handle the heavy, solid feel of his first rifle, he could hear a stern voice whisper into his ear.

"Listen to the voice of the wind, Simonovich."

It was his uncle, who always called him by his father's name. He couldn't even remember what the man had looked like, but the skilled hunter's voice, at least, was as clear in his ears as it had been when he was young.

"See the wind. Watch the snowflakes swirl, the branches shake. And breathe in the scent of the wind. Distinguish the smells of the snow and the trees and the animals."

His uncle had spent most of his life fighting against the wilderness of Siberia. His face burnt nearly black from the light that reflected off the snow, his uncle had taught Stan the ultimate secret that lived in the deep wild, about the life and death that existed in their world of snow and ice.

"Your grandfather's grandfather was the greatest shaman³¹ in his tribe. His blood flows through your veins. Within your soul sleeps the language of the elements, that speak to the earth and understand the trees. Now, Simonovich, listen, for the wind will always be your companion."

Yes... Stan nodded at his uncle's words. The wind had always taught him the most important things he knew. Stan could see the wavering bullet parablellum which confounded every sniper as clear as day. The scent and feel of the wind had always pointed out to Stan the invisible pitfalls and chances.

Armed with the skills his uncle had passed on to him, Stan became a career soldier, and found himself a hunter of men instead of beasts. His unique instincts, his experienced skills, and his high-powered rifle came together to make him a feared angel of death on countless battlefields.

That was why people called him *Shaitane Badi*... the devil's wind. They knew him as the deadly sniper who delivered swift death, borne on the hot, dry drafts of Afghanistan.

And even now, Stan listened to the voice of the wind. His fast friend, invisible and untouchable, yet existing everywhere, was by his side in Roanapur as well.

The swirls and ripples that ran through the sweltering air whispered to Stan of unseen danger.

³¹Urobuchi used "tadibiya" in katakana here; I have been able to find a proper equivalent. Within the Sami, the shaman were known as "noaidi."

...Someone was there. Staring at Stan with intent to kill.

He had no way of hearing the sound of a round being chambered. He could not have smelled the fatal scent of gunpowder.

Southwest...

He sensed the direction the bullet would come from and twisted himself to the side as he rolled, avoiding the first shot. It was beyond the realm of mere experience. It was something that could only have been brought about by Stan's unique instincts. The bullet that should have entered his skull only ripped through the trapezius muscle of his right shoulder thanks to Stan's instantaneous reaction.

Ignoring the staggering pain through a combination of adrenaline and sheer will, Stan sprang to his feet and aimed his Dragunov at the place where the sniper was nested. To have fired at Stan, who'd been in a prone position on the rooftop, the enemy sniper had to have been on a higher building.

Taking the direction into consideration as well, it was easy to tell where the shot had come from. There, on top of the transmission tower six hundred meters away. The crosshairs of Stan's PSO-1 scope came to rest on the silhouette of a man holding a rifle.

The man fired again... but, perhaps surprised by Stan's sudden movements, he missed. The shards of concrete that burst upward dug painfully into his thighs and waist, but Stan ignored the pain and instead became one with his gun, synchronizing his breathing and his heartbeat and his will to kill.

The south wind whispered... *Just a little to the left...*

His index finger became one with the trigger and passed through the spring and the bolt and struck the detonator of the 7.62mm Russian-made bullet, the harsh bark of igniting gunpowder cutting the air.

Stan cried out and dropped his rifle at the same instant, agony tearing through his right arm.

He had fired without even thinking of his injured shoulder, rupturing the wound. Blood stained the ground, more than when he'd been shot.

It was beyond Stan to check and confirm the results of his shot, but since the sniper atop the transmission had not fired again, he must be dead, or at least injured enough to be effectively neutralized.



But if it was the latter, he would certainly have told his comrades about Stan's survival. He'd already been sighted, which meant that if he stayed where he was he'd surely end up surrounded and killed.

Stan ran to the emergency stairs and forced his shaky legs to guide him down.

"Balalaika..."

Stan spat the name like a curse, rage and hatred coloring his voice. She had told Stan that she would remove him by force, and true to her word, she had finally stepped forward to impede his mission.

Laughter bubbled up in him between his ragged breaths. He felt the will to fight rise inside him, the heady sensation letting him forget his pain.

Come, then. Kill me, if you can.

*I know that **you don't exist**. How dare you stand in my way, wraith? I will destroy you myself.*

*Yes. **I refuse you**. I will believe in **Kapitan Pavlovena** to the bitter end.*

It seemed like his right arm would no longer be any help. His collarbone, already fractured from the shot that took him in the shoulder, had probably broken completely once the stock recoiled as he fired. There would be no more firing rifles for him.

Stan put the Dragunov he'd left on the roof out of his mind and drew the Makarov semi-automatic pistol at his waist with his left hand. He racked the slide with his teeth, his right arm dangling useless at his side. He might come face to face with the enemy at any time, but he couldn't afford to stay quiet. Now that he'd lost his rifle, he had no choice but to assault Chang at point blank range with the pistol. If Chang entered the club, it would all be over. He had to get to Hamipong Street before the target's car arrived.

He would not give up. He had a mission. He would kill Chang Wai-San. And he would take that as proof that he had defeated Balalaika. He would show her the reserve of a Spetsnaz.

He reached the first floor and exited the building, making his way toward the main road. He had only run down five flights of stairs, but he felt winded, as though he'd sprinted several kilometers. His shoulder was bleeding too much. But the position of the wound made it impossible for him to stop the bleeding himself.

If he pressed down on the wound with his good hand, he might have been able to at least slow the flow of blood, but unfortunately it was already occupied with holding his Makarov. He couldn't afford to let go of his gun. Balalaika's men could attack at any moment.

He hurried on, staggering and weaving like a drunkard. Loss of blood made his vision blur. He would have traded the world for just a few seconds of rest.

But he couldn't. Hamipong Street was still far in the distance. He was running, but the speed at which he moved was no faster than the walk of a normal man. It felt like if he let his attention wander for even an instant he would trip over his own feet. If he fell over, everything would be for naught. He would never rise again.

His lungs screamed at him, as did his heart. They cried out for the sweet touch of heroin.

He could not give in. His mission was not over yet. This time, *this time*, he would not run away. He would stand and fight to the last. Like *she* had, so long ago.

Exiting the alley, he finally reached Hamipong Street. Chang's car was nowhere to be seen. He still had about a hundred meters left to reach where it would park. A long distance to hit a man with a Makarov.

He walked through the blinding sunlight. But this time, he was not lost. His destination was near.

Victory in my grasp. Honor in my breast. Though it may cost me my life...

A black Mercedes Benz turned the corner and slowly rolled forward, coming to a stop in front of him.

Stan perceived the passage of time in slow motion as the fateful moment arrived.

The back door opened, and the first thing he saw was a foot, adorned with an elegant high heel. Then he saw the officer's coat flapping in the wind, the wavy blonde hair. And the keenly beautiful right side of her face, as well as the terribly burned left side. It was the face of the woman he'd longed so much to see, the woman he had respected so much. And also, it was the face of his most hated enemy.

"Balalaikaaaaaaaaa!!"

Pouring everything he had into his left hand, he raised the Makarov.

Balalaika's right hand flashed, and suddenly he saw the muzzle of a Stechkin.

The sound of just one gunshot split the air... The short, dry bark taking a single life with it as it faded.

Balalaika strode forward, coming to a stop next to Stanislav as he lay on his back, staring up at the sky.

If he was in pain, a final bullet would have been necessary, but the man's face was at peace as he took what would surely be his last breaths.

His blurry eyes slowly focused on Balalaika's face, and, perhaps discovering something there, filled with faint joy.

"...Kapitan? Ah... I see... you are, unharmed..."

"...Operation complete, comrade Junior Sergeant. Your mission is over."

The man let a satisfied sigh pass his lips at the sound of his superior officer's clipped tones.

"I see... Ah, how wonderful... I must, propose a toast... when we get home..."

"Indeed. Just this once, I will provide the vodka. Be sure to hand out some to everyone in the squadron."

Stanislav smiled and nodded. Balalaika knew he was feeling the presence of the comrades who had been swallowed by the sands of a faraway country.

A stray draft blew down the deserted street, gently caressing the hair splayed over his pale face. Perhaps he could still feel it, for his expression suddenly colored with chagrin.

"...Ah, Kapitan... My apologies. I, I have lost the direction... Where is the wind... blowing from...?"

The wind had become stale from the heat of the noon sun. Balalaika looked in the direction where it had blown, her gaze growing distant.

"It comes from the north."

"Ah, I see..."

Stanislav closed his eyes, his features at rest once more.

"That means, it comes from my homeland... I can... smell... the pine trees..."

He fell silent, and did not speak again.

Balalaika looked down at the face of her fallen comrade, searching for a suitable epitaph. At length she realized that no such thing was necessary, and honored him with a silent salute, as she had done so many times before, for so many others.

"Чёрт! Каая сука! Невозможно! (Shit! She's insane! I can't believe her!)"

Tatiana Yakovleva let loose with a flurry of curses as she sped out of the city in a rented Toyota.

She had heard everything that happened on Hamipong Street, thanks to a store owner to whom she'd discretely passed some money and a prepaid phone in advance. It was the worst outcome she could possibly imagine.

Stan had failed. If he'd been gunned down by the Triad's bodyguards then there might have been some hope of salvaging the situation, but no such luck. Balalaika had shot him herself.

"She... she shot her own comrade! That witch! I should stick her heart into a pot and boil it!"

She had heard that the bonds of trust and camaraderie between Afghanistan veterans were stronger than anything. She certainly hadn't expected the bitch to shoot him dead without even blinking. Balalaika wasn't sane. She was a mad dog with a thirst for blood.

Her plan to frame Balalaika with Chang's death had failed. There was nothing for Tatiana to do except make a run for it.

Her career within Hotel Moscow was as good as over, too. Laptev and the other former KGB would all deny knowing her at all. But she still had her life, and that was enough. More than anything right now, she needed to escape from Balalaika's turf. Then she would use her old connections to go to earth, looking for the right time to throw her lot in with a different organization and build herself up once more.

Balalaika had been at the scene herself, which meant that she would have her hands full for a time taking care of it and wouldn't notice immediately that Tatiana was gone. She had at least an hour. If she could catch a plane out of Thailand within then she'd be-

Her mind running on overdrive as she consoled herself with optimistic thoughts, Tatiana had no chance to react to the Benz as it lurched forth from a side alley.

The Toyota's light chassis practically bounced off the Benz's bumper, the fender and wheels flying away as the car itself went into an uncontrolled spin before coming to a heavy stop.

Tatiana lived thanks to her seat belt and the airbag, but a hand crashed through the window before she could get a hold of her senses and pulled the door's lock upward, throwing it open and dragging her out.

The hand, more like a boulder made of flesh than anything, belonged to Boris, Balalaika's right hand man. He shoved the disoriented woman into the back seat of the Benz without a word and then entered himself. He told the driver to go.

Leaving the scrapped Toyota on the road, the Benz drove serenely down the road.

"Wha... what are you people thinki-"

Boris shoved a cellphone into Tatiana's face as she struggled to draw herself up into some measure of haughty indignation. The LCD screen told her that it was already connected.

Tatiana cautiously brought the phone to her ear, and was immediately greeted by Fry Face's cold voice.

"...Chang never came to the Golden Swinging Nightclub. The meeting itself was a lie. *And if I recall correctly, only one person told that lie to you.*"

"...Gah!"

Realizing that she'd fallen completely into Balalaika's trap, Tatiana bit her lip in frustrated despair.

That meant that Balalaika had already had her eye on Tatiana when they talked the day before, suspecting that she was behind the plot to create a rift between the Triad and Hotel Moscow. Boris had probably been tailing her all day. And once an assassin had appeared at the place where Chang would *not* come, the damning evidence had let him move to secure her person.

There was nothing she could say, no lies she could weave, to get herself out of the situation. Checkmate.

"...If you kill me, you'll never find the double agent in your-"

But Balalaika's cold laughter cut off even this last desperate ploy.

"*That was your greatest mistake. I'm sure it was standard procedure during your KGB days to fabricate the existence of a double agent to foster suspicion and anxiety in your targets. But such lies do not work on me.*"

There was belief like iron hidden behind her taunting tones.

"There is no flaw in the bond of the Vysotniki. *Such a thing is impossible.* A statue of Stalin would be erected in the Vatican ere it happened. Though, I suppose the very concept of people bound by such camaraderie existing would be incomprehensible to a filthy spy like you..."

"Camaraderie, you say...?"

The word brought to life a rage in her breast that flared even greater than her despair.

"That was when you dug your own grave. There was no way that something only we knew could possibly make its way to your ears. That could only mean that *you knew everything beforehand through other means.*"

"Shut up, you baba yaga!" Tatiana shrieked, cursing the fact that she couldn't strangle the woman on the other side of the connection with her bare hands.

"You killed a comrade with your own hands and you babble on about *camaraderie*?! You bitch! You crazy Afghan reject! I could fall into Hell and receive less punishment than you!"

"Haha, well now... Didn't I tell you? That *someone like you would never understand.*"

Balalaika ignored Tatiana's curses, an icy chuckle her only reply.

"Now, then. One last question. Who was behind this? I know you don't have the brains to have come up with this by yourself."

"...You think I'd just tell you?"

"I could torture you until you did, but... No matter. *I have some idea of who it might be.* We're busy people, you see. We don't have the time to waste extracting confirmation of an already foregone conclusion."

And so Balalaika coldly denied Tatiana her last worth, her potential as a key to the plot.

"Goodbye. Comrade Zamyatin suffered wounds which will take three months to heal while putting a stop to what your scheming caused. I will pass on his message to you. 'Choke on your own filth, Cheka.'"

"You-"

The line went dead without waiting for her reply. Tatiana could only clench the cellphone in her hand hard enough to make the LCD screen crack as the empty dial tone taunted her.

"...Where are you taking me?" Tatiana asked Boris, knowing even as she said it that it was a futile question.

Never one to disappoint, Boris stared straight ahead, giving no hint that he'd even heard her. He was like a butchering machine next to a squealing pig.

The Benz sped through the streets, through the entrance to Roanapur, past the railroad bridge from which hangman's nooses hung, out of the city. Strangely, it seemed that it was heading in the same direction that Tatiana had been when she was going to the airport.

She found one small fact to take comfort in as her mind froze over with resignation.

...At least, it seemed, she wasn't fated to die in that terrible city.

Woman Found Murdered In Airport Public Bathroom Crime Flies High - Holes In Airport Security Revealed

The corpse of a Russian woman named Tatiana Yakovleva (31) was discovered by an airport employee cleaning the stalls of the women's bathroom in the international arrivals lobby of Narita Airport, at approximately 8 in the morning of the 7th.

According to investigating officials, Yakovleva got off an international flight from Thailand's Don Muang Airport at 6 AM. Witnesses have testified to having seen her in the company of two white men, both on the plane and in the airport. Authorities suspect that these men may have had something to do with the murder, and are currently pursuing leads as to their whereabouts.

It was late at night when the phone in Bougainvillea Trading's central office rang with a call from Tokyo.

"Алë (Hello), who's calling?"

Balalaika knew without looking who the man on the other side would be, and so she deliberately injected a false note of formality into her voice.

"...It's Laptev. Sorry for the late call. I had something urgent I needed to ask you."

"Oh? What could you possibly have to ask me at this hour?"

The voice of Hotel Moscow's Japan branch boss was rigid with barely suppressed anxiety.

"It's about the woman who was sent to audit you. Tatiana Yakovleva. Slevinin himself called just a minute ago, but I have to make sure... Is it true that she stole your money and ran from Roanapur?"

Balalaika let out an exaggerated sigh, even as inside, she bared her teeth in a feral predator's grin.

"It's all true. Vexing, yes, but I suppose it's all my fault for believing her flimsy excuses. It was no small matter, so I had no choice but to contact Moscow myself, embarrassing as it is. Why, I even received a warning to tighten my security measures. But why is that of concern to you?"

"Tatiana Yakovleva was discovered dead in Narita Airport this morning. Everything she had on her had been stolen. Not just the money, everything. Even her gold teeth."

"Oh, how horrible. I wonder what happened," Balalaika said, taking care to tread just shy of outright impudence as she expressed her "surprise."

"I suppose it's only fitting that she meet her end in such a manner, but then there's the fact that she let some petty criminal make off with our money. I don't think we'll ever get it back now... But you know, there is one thing that bothers me. Why would she have chosen Japan, of all places?"

"How the hell should I know?! If I could I'd ask her myself!" Laptev cried, finally revealing his anxiety at Balalaika's innocent prodding.

"Our leader wants to know what's going on and I have nothing to tell him! Why the hell did she run to my turf?!"

"I don't know, and neither do I want to, Vasili. But come to think of it, I do seem to remember hearing that she worked under you during your days in the Seventh Department."

"..."

It seemed that Laptev had felt the fierce joy of a wolf savagely worrying its prey in Balalaika's tone, even over the phone. His silence told her everything she needed to know.

"Really, now. Tatiana ran away from Thailand... all the way to Japan? I'm sorry, Vasili. It pains me to say this, but I just can't ignore the evidence staring me in the face."

"...Balalaika. I have something to ask you," Laptev said slowly, apparently having decided that there had been enough sidestepping the issue.

"Did Tatiana really steal your money? Did she really come to Japan of her own free will? Coincidences like this are making me think that someone's set a trap for me."

"Oh? Are you suspecting me of something?" Balalaika asked, feigning shock, even as glacial cold seeped into her voice. "Perhaps we could ask our leader to send an objective third party here and ask for a proper investigation? I'm sure that someone like Borodino would be more than happy to send one of his agents to look over everything. *Everything she did here in Roanapur*, that is."

"..."

Only the sound of heavy breathing came from the receiver, ragged with tension and anger.

"I do so want to prove my innocence, you see. Find the person who killed Tatiana and get back the money, will you? I'll even send you a thank-you card if you do."

"Balalaika, you bitch..."

"I hear that the Chinese in Kabuki-cho are pressuring you lately. Vasili, if you leave your job unattended while meddling in things that are none of your business, I fear you won't be long with us... Well, then. До свидания (Farewell)," she said, leaving Laptev with a final venomous goodbye as she killed the line.

"...In the end, it seems we couldn't get any solid evidence, Kapitan."

Sergeant Boris, who had been standing at her side as she made the call, gave a short sigh of disappointment.

"It doesn't matter. He's been slipping up lately anyway. He only got the position through politics, so once his reputation is tarnished, *that'll be it for him*. Once the Chinese finally drive him out, even Slevinin will turn away from him."

Balalaika took a cigar, and immediately Boris prepared a match. A guillotine also appeared in his hand as he waited to cut the cigar according to his mistress's tastes.

Using an oil lighter to light a cigar would be the height of folly, for the smell of oil would destroy the cigar's exquisite scent. Even within the Vysotniki, Boris was the only one with the privilege of carrying the cedar matches for her cigars.

Balalaika luxuriated in the smooth taste spreading through her mouth as she leaned back, smiling at the smoke rising toward the dark ceiling.

"Of course, if it fell to me to bring about his end when the time finally comes... Ah, that would truly be wonderful, would it not?"

Epilogue

Revy's face as she stared out the bridge window at the waves was a study in depression and laziness.

"Aww, c'mon, Dutch. Don't be such a hardass. Can't ya give us at least a little time off?"

"Stop complaining, Revy. You know what they say. The labor of the body relieves us from the fatigues of the mind. Something about it forming the happiness of the poor."

"...Yeah, I bet some poor motherfucker was the one who said that."

"Actually, it was a French nobleman."

"Yeah well, fuck him, too."

The good ship Black Lagoon cut through the waves, carrying the four pirates along through the Malacca Strait as always. Only a day had passed since the plan to assassinate Chang Wai-San had been brought to an end.

"It's not exactly like we could refuse a request from Mister Chang, right?" Rock asked in an attempt to placate her, but Revy was not to be consoled. She spat out a curse and sighed heavily, breathing out smoke from the Lucky Seven clenched between her lips.

"Well, he went too far this time. I mean, you gotta let a girl a break every so often, doncha think? He *knows* how much shit we went through the past few days."

"This is Mister Chang's way of showing that it's all water under the bridge. You should be thanking him."

Their Triad-funded mission this time was to attack a disguised smuggling ship.

The boat in question had trespassed on the Triad's area several times already, ignoring repeated warnings to stop. At last, the Triad had decided that something had to be done. If the target stopped as directed, they'd just dump the smuggled cargo into the sea and leave it at that, but if it resisted, they'd have no choice but to let a little seawater into the hold.

The important thing here was that the goods that the Triad didn't want being traded didn't enter circulation, so if the pirates hired to do the job got greedy and took the stuff for themselves it'd all be for naught. That meant that whoever was chosen to attack the smuggler ship had to be someone the Triad could trust. In other words, Chang had given this mission to the Lagoon Company to show that he harbored no doubts about their trustworthiness, and so

Dutch and the others had no choice but to drag their weary bodies back into the torpedo boat and set off.

"...Y'know, I still don't know what those fucktards tryin' to kill Mister Chang were thinkin'. Did they really think they had a chance taking on the Triad with a team like that?"

"Who knows? Even if they had some kinda ulterior motive, it's probably gone straight to hell by now."

Of the ones who'd escaped Revy's clutches, they'd heard that the ninja had switched sides and was now working under the Triad, but Stan's whereabouts were still a mystery, as were those of the unknown redhead who'd solicited them at Pangkal Pinang, "Jane." Still, Chang had declared the case to be closed, so they supposed that he had a good reason for doing so.

They'd heard a rumor going around the Yellow Flag that there'd been a gunfight on Hamipong Street on the same day that Revy took care of Jake, but nobody seemed to know much about it. Either way, the whole thing left a bad taste in the Lagoon Company's mouths.

"I think... They were some pretty strange people, weren't they?" Rock murmured quietly, going over the past few hectic days in his head. Revy snorted derisively.

"Look who's talkin', dumbass. Who ever heard of a pirate walkin' around with a necktie, wearing goddamn dress shoes?"

"Uhh, well..."

She had a point. Still, he thought it was a sight better than anachronistic buccaneers or shadow warriors... or was it? It was true that the sight of a plainly dressed salaryman was actually pretty rare in Roanapur. Looking at it objectively, he supposed that he might be just as strange a sight to others as the people who'd caused such a mess a few days ago.

Dutch laughed out loud, watching Rock struggle with his sudden doubts.

"Who cares? This is the kinda place where nuns wave around automags. All the crazy motherfuckers in the world're probably drawn to Roanapur."

"Ah, you're right. There was that one killing machine who came wearing a maid outfit."

"...Motherfucker, you made me remember it."

Revy's face twisted with disgust as she recalled her encounter with the implacable head maid.

Just then, Benny's voice came from the communications room, where he'd been sitting staring at the radar.

"Okay, found it. It's going pretty fast. We'd probably be better off turning north by northeast to cut it off instead of just heading straight ahead."

"Gotcha, Benny boy. Now, Rock, it's your turn," Dutch said, taking the helm and handing a loudspeaker to Rock.

"...Err, Dutch? How long do I have to keep on doing this?"

"A wise man named Karl Marx once said that every member of society had to do what they were good at and in return they'd get what they need. Revy, got the RPG ready?"

"Heheh, just give the word."

Revy's mood lightened immediately once she sensed carnage on the horizon. Nobody paid the slightest attention to Rock's sad sigh.

"Ah... Testing, testing. The weather is fine today... Testing..."

Rock felt a headache coming on already as he fiddled with the settings on the loudspeaker, staring at the smuggler ship disguised as a fishing boat about two hundred meters away.

Once again, he found himself facing down criminals armed with nothing more than a loudspeaker. Somehow, he didn't think they'd just give up.

"Uhh... To the gentlemen who're carrying questionable merchandise on that ship... We, err, represent the Triad, and must regretfully request you to stop and prepare to be boarded."

...Look at that, the smuggler ship turned tail and began accelerating as it ran away. Who would've guessed? From the speed at which it was moving, it looked like the boat was hiding something at least on par with the Lagoon's engine behind its innocent looking exterior.

"Oh hey, looks like it's my turn, Rock," Revy said, smiling in anticipation of the explosion to come as she swung the RPG up onto her shoulder.

Even with Revy's skills, they'd need to be within at least a hundred meters of the target to accurately hit it with a grenade. Dutch accordingly jacked up the engine to full throttle, chasing the hapless smugglers across the water.

Suddenly, Benny's voice came from the speakers again, sharp with warning.

"Dutch, something else just appeared on the radar! It's at 9 o' clock... It's coming right for us!"

"What? Is it a Thai patrol boat?"

"They'd have contacted us on the radio first if they were. But this speed and course... I'm not certain, but I think they might want to pick a fight. You think they're working with those smugglers?"

"No way! I didn't hear anything about that..."

Even as Dutch and Benny tried to get a hold of the situation, a huge, resounding boom split the sea air. Everyone froze at the sound, and as they watched the deck of the smuggler ship before them exploded in a pillar of flame.

"What the hell?!"

Rock took up the binoculars and spotted a new ship on their port side. Thanks to Dutch's stern mentoring, even he could recognize most conventional ships by their shape alone...

...Which was why he was unable to suppress a gasp of dismay as he focused on the incoming craft.

"Shit... it's a Vosper MTB!"

The motor torpedo boat, which had been made from the base design of the American 80-foot Elco PT boat, was a formidable adversary that eclipsed the Black Lagoon in both size and armament. It was a terrifying foe.

The Lagoon had reinforced armor plates on its hull, granted, but they'd be as much use as wooden planks in the face of the Vosper's main gun, the 40mm Bofors autocannon... Except, Rock noticed, there was something strange about the boat's silhouette as it approached.

"...Huh? What in the world is that...?"

"What's wrong, Rock? Are you sure it's a Vosper?!"

"Well, no, it is, but..."

Instead of a 40mm autocannon, there was an honest-to-God bronze Culverin front-loading cannon mounted on the front of the ship, white smoke drifting lazily upward from its barrel. Standing beside it, packing in gunpowder, were two men *with bandannas gracing their heads, one eye each hidden behind eye patches, sporting scruffy roguish beards.*

Not quite able to believe what he saw, Rock's gaze drifted upwards and came to rest on the Jolly Roger proudly on display at the top of the ship's communications antenna. Then he looked down again, at the grinning woman standing on the open bridge, taking in the flintlock pistol



she waved about, as well as the tricorne atop her head, her swallowtail coat, and her large breasts.

"...You've got to be kidding me."

She looked almost exactly like Caroline Morgan, who he knew had been found dead on the Zaltzman.

"Haha... I mean, Yarharharhar! We finally meet, Black Lagoon! I been lookin' for ye scurvy seadogs, arr!"

Raucous laughter exploded from the Vosper's external speakers.

"I be Catherine Morgan, the new captain o' the good ship Millennium Tortuga! I'll send ye all to Davy Jones' Locker fer betrayin' an' murderin' me beloved sister Caroline! An' I'm takin' all yer booty to boot! Yarharharhar!"

They'd been twins, it seemed... Even the way she talked was practically identical to her late sister. Rock could only sigh at the unexpected ambusher, to say nothing of her ridiculous jump to conclusions.

"I don't know whether to call this all a misunderstanding or take it as a willful misinterpretation... Hey, how did her sister end up dead, anyway?"

"Hell if I know. She already had a new breathin' hole in her forehead when I found her."

For his part, Dutch had clearly given up on everything. He slumped forward onto the steering apparatus, feebly rubbing at his bald head in a futile attempt to stave off his oncoming migraine.

"What do you think, Revy? Do you want to explain our side of the story to our guest over there?"

"Hmph, like hell I do. She wants a fuckin' fight, she's got one. I'll teach those Caribbean pussies how things work around here."

Revy grinned savagely as she put on a pair of headphones. It seemed she was already raring to go.

"Dutch, we can put off those smugglers for a bit, right? Go straight at the dumbfucks on our port side. *I'll take 'em out as we pass.*"

"Jousting, huh. Okay, just don't fuck up."

"Course I won't."

The CD player hanging from Revy's gunbelt contained a playlist of songs that Revy had chosen herself, her "Jitterbug of Death" collection. She flipped through it as the Vosper loomed ever larger before them, finding just the right one for the situation at hand. Today, she felt like... yes, Rage Against the Machine's "Sleep Now in the Fire" would be perfect.

"Ain't it great, Rock? The grenade I'm about to shoot's gonna go down as a *necessary expense* since they attacked first. I'm happy 'cause I get to shoot, you're happy 'cause it don't come outta yer own pocket, everyone's happy, 'cept those dumbass cunts who're gonna get an RPG to the face, right?"

"...Yeah, I guess."

If he objected now, all he'd achieve would be ruining Revy's good mood. Rock gave up and grasped one of the handles on the deck in preparation for Dutch's wild steering.

The two ships closed in on each other at full speed, eating up the distance at an alarming rate. In an instant it was right in front of them. They could even make out the features of the man putting a flame to the cannon's fuse.

Feeling the adrenaline flow headily in her veins, Revy began to sing along with Zack de la Rocha as she aimed the RPG straight at the enemy ship's bridge.

"Hey, hey, sleep now in the fire!!"

Rocket fuel and black powder ignited in unison, the booming roar of exchanged shots sounding over the raging waves.

Just below the equator, there existed an island of blue-black waves and stifling heat, forsaken by God. The procession of damned souls there continued without end...

Black Lagoon: Shaitane Badi

Fin

Special End of Book Interview
Hiroe Rei and Urobuchi Gen

Courtesy of the Sunday GX Editorial Department

● **I love guns made of wood and steel!**

-If you would mind telling us how you two met?

Urobuchi: It all started when I left a post on the message board of Mister Hiroe's homepage. It was a long, long time ago. I just liked the sexy women with tempting hips and breasts. And they had guns to boot. (laughs)

Hiroe: Huh? Was that how it was? (laughs) I'm sorry, but I don't remember a thing about that. My oldest memory is receiving a *Phantom of Inferno* preview disc at a Comiket. And I was struck then by the strangest feeling that I'd never meet Mister Urobuchi ever again.

Urobuchi: Whaaat? Why's that? (laughs)

Hiroe: Well, consider how our schedules never fit. I wanted to meet you and talk about lots of things, but you know how things often turn out, like gears that just don't fit together... And I felt like we were sort of rivals in the ring, since we work on similar things... Which is why I was so glad when a certain animation studio provided me with the opportunity to meet you again. I read the interview in *Phantom's* mook magazine, and remember how you said there that you loved guns made of wood and steel? Well, I said the same thing in a GX interview. I read that and thought to myself, "Oh wow, we're the same!" (laughs)

Urobuchi: There are people out there who just can't stand Glocks, right? (Editor's note: Glocks are largely constructed of polymer parts.)

Hiroe: Exactly. I mean, doesn't it look just like a toy? And I hate the assault rifles they're using in the U.S. Army these days too! I wish everyone would just use AK's!

Urobuchi: I look at those guns and think, "What are you going to do with that cutting edge tech, anyway? Fight aliens?" (laughs)

Hiroe: See, this is why I like you! We think alike! (laughs)

● **A work that makes you think it's a movie.**

-Starting with Mister Urobuchi. What do you think of Mister Hiroe's work?

Urobuchi: When I read Mister Hiroe's work, it feels like I'm watching a movie. I guess you could say it's like a movie was translated into a manga. Honestly, haven't you ever thought that you wanted to direct a film?

Hiroe: I'd be lying if I said no. (laughs)

Urobuchi: I thought so. Mister Hiroe's manga always make me think to myself, "If you translated a movie's pacing or editing methods into a series of panels, this is what you'd get." If

you were to divide manga into those that focus on characters and those that focus on scenes, I'd say that Mister Hiroe's work falls squarely into the latter category. I just love that so much. The way that the action just unfolds before the eye, willing you to forget paltry things like how much ammo that gun can hold. (laughs) Don't you think it'd be just great as a live action movie, too?

Hiroe: That's pretty much how it is. Thank you.

●***Phantom* was a rival.**

-Then, Mister Hiroe. Tell us what you thought about Mister Urobuchi's work.

Hiroe: When I played *Phantom*, in all honesty, I felt like I had a rival. (laughs) You know how when you meet someone who feels like he's standing in the same ring as you are, how you're a little glad but at the same time you feel a little confrontational. (laughs)

Urobuchi: Of course. (laughs)

Hiroe: But then *Saya no Uta*, that came after it, had Cthulu Mythos-ish themes in it too, didn't it? That's when I realized, "Ah, this person can write stuff like this—not just gunslinging stories—too." *Saya no Uta* was a fine piece of work in my opinion, even if you only look at the story.

Urobuchi: You're embarrassing me.

Hiroe: And take the one I played recently, *Zoku Satsuriku no Django -Jigoku no Shoukinkubi-*. It's got girls like a romance sim, yes, but the story's actually like an adventure novel. It starts with a bang and gets right to the point, and then starts building up the atmosphere. It's even got stuff to make a grown man cry. I really liked that kind of thing.

Urobuchi: Thank you.

●**And so a terrifying collaboration was brought about.**

-We hear that this novel actually came about because Mister Hiroe asked Mister Urobuchi to do it...

Hiroe: I always had this sort of condition inside myself that if *Black Lagoon* was ever novelized, someone who knew the "rhythm" of a gunfight would have to do it. And I also thought that being faithful to the atmosphere of the original was a huge factor, along with how well it could be linked to canon. To me, it seemed that Mister Urobuchi had all of these skills. While I was playing *Django* to confirm one last time whether he would be the one, my thoughts changed along the way from "I think he might do a good job!" to "I can't think of anyone else for the job!" and so I just asked him on a whim.

Urobuchi: It wasn't really a surprise that he asked, in a sense. I'd been thinking to myself, you see, that I'd surely end up doing a *Lagoon* novel some day. (everyone laughs)

Hiroe: Awesome. (laughs)

Urobuchi: Well, I suppose you could just say that it was a feeling, like, "I might be the one to write it!" (laughs)

Hiroe: That's great!

Urobuchi: That's why when it actually happened, I was like, "Hell yeah!" I really felt this personal investment even when I was reading the manga, you see. "Oh ho, so that's how things are going this time?" That kind of feeling. (laughs) I felt more like a mangaka working for the same magazine, waiting for it to print, than an actual reader.

Hiroe: Really, now. Something like the rivalry I felt from *Phantom*, then.

Urobuchi: Something like two people who set up shop at the same corner in Akihabara.

Hiroe: That feeling of "Oh, shit!" that you get when someone else uses a good storyline that you wish you'd come up with. (laughs)

Urobuchi: Yes, exactly. (laughs)

●Write something that will challenge *Black Lagoon*.

"Mister Urobuchi agreed to write, so *Black Lagoon* is officially getting a light novel. Please, try to write something to challenge the world of *Black Lagoon*! Make a little Urobuchi World inside it, and mess things up however you will. (laughs) I want to see the demon inside Urobuchi Gen!"

-Hiroe Rei

"Charging into Roanapur is like exposing oneself to the barrels of twin Sword Cutlasses... But even considering that danger, a man can't help but want to give it a try... Because Miss Revy's slim thighs are waiting there, accentuated by her denim hot pants!"

-Urobuchi Gen

Taken from the June 2008 issue of Monthly Sunday GX

-Mister Urobuchi, what did you feel upon actually writing the story?

Urobuchi: It came so easily that I surprised myself. I'm actually a fairly slow writer. I always have trouble somewhere... But the world of *Black Lagoon* was really familiar! It felt quite close to me.

Hiroe: Thank you!

Urobuchi: I was really surprised that I was able to write and write without running into anything that made me stop and think it over.

Hiroe: Our similarities at work again?

Urobuchi: It felt like I was borrowing a movie set called Roanapur and using it however I wanted. I really liked the feeling of doing whatever I liked! All the while I was writing, I felt like, "Ah, there's a camera just lying here on the street! I can pick it up and start filming right now!"

Hiroe: Personally, I'm just glad that you enjoyed writing it.

Urobuchi: I even thought that Brother Chang was going a bit far sometimes, but then I shrugged and thought, what the hell. (laughs)

Hiroe: I *did* ask you to challenge the world of *Lagoon*, after all. (laughs)

Urobuchi: I really felt pressured. (laughs) I felt like I didn't dare to mess things up.

Hiroe: I was more curious to read "the world of Black Lagoon from the pen of Urobuchi Gen" more than I was really worried about it staying faithful to my work. That was why it didn't matter even if you'd written it aiming to conquer Roanapur in its entirety.

Urobuchi: If I had to choose something that bothered me, it was probably the anime. I'd look at it and think, "So that's how they did Roanapur..." (laughs)

Hiroe: That's Director Katabuchi's reconstruction of Roanapur.

Urobuchi: That's why I really worried a bit when writing chapter one. I didn't know whether words would suffice to pass on the feeling of *Black Lagoon*... I couldn't write a single word until I felt that it was possible. But as I wrote, I felt like, "Hey, this works!"

Hiroe: That's the good thing about Roanapur. It's got no nationality, and as long as it's bloody, anything can happen there. (laughs)

Urobuchi: Yes, life is cheap in that neighborhood. (laughs) I really enjoyed myself in Roanapur. In a way I enjoyed myself even more than when writing an original piece. (laughs) Personally, when I work on an original story, I always find myself worrying, right from the beginning, about where I'll end up when all is said and done. I have this habit of thinking about the story before I'm even done ironing out the background. To bring back that movie set analogy, think of it as setting up the cameras first and then building the sets around them. I keep thinking to myself things like, "I should put something here so that the viewer won't see the wires," and then I just end up unable to enjoy writing. That's why I really liked having a set that appealed to me right from the get-go to write a novel with.

●Closing Statement

-Finally, a few words of congratulations to one another. Mister Urobuchi, you first, if you'd please.

Urobuchi: I really think that girls with guns are extremely erotic! That feeling of release when they fire, I suppose. (laughs) That feeling of freedom, coupled with tight asses and legs and breasts is almost like some sort of traditional craft. (laughs) I'd like if Mister Hiroe focused a little more on that sort of thing. Please!

Hiroe: Well, since you asked so nicely, I guess I'll just have to try and include more of that from now on!

-And Mister Hiroe.

Hiroe: I'm really glad that we had the opportunity to work together like this. I truly believe that Mister Urobuchi is the only one who can properly novelize an otaku-oriented gunfight. He knows what works, I guess you could say.

Urobuchi: Isn't it just the difference of whether you've ever been looked down on for being a gun nut or not? (laughs) Or rather, how you spent those harsh times...

Hiroe: Ah, that's it. (laughs) Gunfighting is really a hard genre to do, isn't it? I'd like it if you could do with words what I'm doing with drawings, something solid with plenty of fine women. And maybe something horror oriented, too.

Urobuchi: Thank you!

-Thank you both for your time.

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